

MEDICAL EXAMINER

HEALTH AND MEDICINE EXPLAINED.

JAN. 7 2014 11:48 PM

The Real Victims of Satanic Ritual Abuse

The dangers were imaginary, but the consequences were not.

By Linda Rodriguez McRobbie



Illustration by Charlie Powell

Among the atrocities that Frances and Dan Keller were supposed to have committed while running a day care center out of their Texas home: drowning and dismembering babies in front of the children; killing dogs and cats in front of the children; transporting the children to Mexico to be sexually abused by soldiers in the Mexican army; dressing as pumpkins and shooting children in the

arms and legs; putting the children into a pool with sharks that ate babies; putting blood in the children's Kool-Aid; cutting the arm or a finger off a gorilla at a local park; and exhuming bodies at a cemetery, forcing children to carry the bones.

It was frankly unbelievable—except that people, most importantly, a Texas jury, *did* believe the Kellers had committed at least some of these acts. In 1992, the Kellers were convicted of aggravated sexual assault on a child and each sentenced to 48 years in prison. The investigation into their supposed crimes took slightly more than a year, the trial only six days.

And now, even the **Travis County district attorney agrees that the trial was unfair.**

After multiple appeal efforts and 21 years in prison, the Kellers are finally free. Fran Keller, 63, **was released from prison on Nov. 26** on a personal bond, just in time for Thanksgiving. Her daughter was waiting for her with a bag full of the first clothes that weren't prison-issued that Keller had seen in years. Dan, who turned 72 in prison and now walks with a cane, was released on Dec. 5; this time, Fran was there to greet him. (The Kellers divorced while in prison yet remain close, as close as two people locked up in separate prisons for crimes they say they didn't commit can be.)

Why did psychotherapists and investigators conclude that these fantastic allegations were true?

The Kellers were released after the doctor who had testified at their trial and provided the only physical evidence that any sexual assault had taken place recanted his testimony. Travis County District Attorney Rosemary Lehmberg agreed with the findings of appeals filed on the Kellers' behalf that they were denied their right to a fair trial and that their conviction should be overturned, allowing the Kellers to be released while their appeals move through the courts. In practical terms, this means the Kellers are on a path that may lead to their complete exoneration—and that they were able to celebrate their first Christmas with their families in more than 20 years.

Their release may also finally mark the end to one of the strangest, widest-reaching, and most damaging moral panics in America's history: the satanic ritual abuse panic of the 1980s and 1990s.

"That was literally a witch hunt," said Keith Hampton, pro-bono lawyer for the Kellers. "We say 'witch hunt' in this figurative way, but that was a modern-day literal witch hunt. They really were after people who they thought were worshipping at the feet of the Dark Lord."

So what the hell happened?

* * *

The Keller case is typical of the satanic ritual abuse panic and the dozens of cases that popped up in breathless media reports. The trouble started when Christy Chaviers, a 3-year-old girl who was an infrequent visitor to the day care during the summer of 1991, told her mother that Dan had spanked her. With coaxing from her mother and her therapist, Donna David-Campbell, whom Christy had been seeing to deal with acting-out issues, an incident of spanking turned into something much worse—Dan Keller, the little girl said, had defecated on her head and raped her with a pen. From there, the stories Christy told David-Campbell became wilder: The Kellers "had everyone take off their clothes and had a parrot that pecked them in the pee-pee," they made her smoke a cigarette, they "came to her house with a chainsaw and cut her dog Buffy in the vagina until it bled." David-Campbell concluded not that Christy was an imaginative child having trouble with her parents' divorce, but that she was the victim of ritual abuse.

The case was turned over to the police. Parents of children who'd attended the preschool, however, continued to talk to one another and their children. In October, another child, also a therapy client of David-Campbell, told his parents that he'd been abused; a third child, whose mother was in contact with the parents of the other two, came forward in February 1992. By the time of the trial in November 1992, the stories included the killing of a baby tiger in a graveyard, a person being shot by people in sheriff's uniforms and then dismembered with a chainsaw, videotaped sex with adults and other children, and the Kellers wearing white robes and lighting candles to assault them. No other children, including those children who were supposedly the targets of

abuse, or their parents confirmed the accounts. When put on the witness stand, Christy, by then 5, was at first unwilling to say anything had happened at all, then did, then recanted. Friends and acquaintances of the Kellers, including their landlord, who frequently dropped by unannounced, testified that they'd never seen anything out of the ordinary at the Kellers' day care.

As with previous panics, the dangers may have been imaginary, but the consequences were not.

Why did psychotherapists and investigators conclude that these fantastic allegations were true? Because at the time, pretty much everyone else in America did.

The seeds of the panic were planted with the 1980 publication of *Michelle Remembers*, the best-selling account of a Canadian psychotherapist's work with a woman named Michelle Smith, who, under his care, began recalling forgotten memories of horrific childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her mother and others who were part of a devil-worshipping cult.

The book, though riddled with fantastical claims (for example, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Archangel Michael healed Smith's physical scars), launched a cottage industry in recovering memories of satanic ritual abuse. (The psychotherapist and Smith later married.)

The panic began in earnest with the **McMartin Preschool trial**, an investigation that began 30 years ago. The owners of a California preschool and several teachers were accused of molesting a 2½-year-old boy; before it was over, hundreds of children, usually after lengthy sessions with coercive therapists, came forward to say that they, too, had been taken to a church to watch the beheading of a baby, then forced to drink its blood or flown by plane to random cities for sexual abuse, or countless other bizarre stories.

While that investigation and trial unfolded, other cases surfaced. Media poured attention on the claims, which made great fodder for a newly created 24-hour news cycle (CNN Headline News launched in 1982). As televangelists prayed for deliverance from Satan's scourge, talk show "experts" claimed that every imaginable form of abuse was happening on a massive scale in America and that networks of Satanists had infiltrated schools, the police, and local government. Geraldo Rivera claimed in a

televised 1987 special report that more than a million Satanists were plying their evil trade in America *right at the very moment*. (He has since apologized.) In 1989, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Michelle Smith and another woman who claimed to have recovered memories of being abused by a satanic cult; Sally Jesse Raphael, not to be outdone, ran two shows on the subject. In 1990, ***Don't Make Me Go Back, Mommy: A Child's Book About Satanic Ritual Abuse***, a children's picture book featuring colored-pencil drawings of children being abused in satanic rituals, appeared in libraries and therapists' offices. In 1992, folk singer Joan Baez released "**Play Me Backwards**," a song in the voice of a victim of satanic ritual abuse who was forced to witness the sacrifice of a baby and is now recollecting her repressed memories.

"It sounds laughable," says Debbie Nathan, an investigative reporter who co-wrote ***Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt*** about the panic and is now a director for the National Center for Reason and Justice, which took up the Kellers' cause. But there is certainly historical precedent, going back even further than the Salem witch trials: Ancient Romans, for example, claimed that Christians ate babies; Christians later claimed that Jews used Christian babies' blood in religious rituals.

“Children symbolize the good things about culture, the innocence and purity, the future of the culture,” says Nathan. When a culture feels under threat in some way, fear and anxiety focus on the safety of children. America was experiencing upheavals in gender roles, child-rearing practices, and social expectations, and more and more people were embracing fundamentalist religion and belief in the devil. The fear of satanic ritual abuse was perpetuated by both ends of the political spectrum. “In the right wing, you had that kind of preoccupation with Satan, and on the left, you had a lot of concern with the well-being of children, and women going back to work, and I think it was a perfect storm of fear and anxiety,” says Nathan. Most if not all of those involved believed they were acting in the best interests of the children—which meant that any healthy skepticism was interpreted as anti-child.

But extensive investigations revealed little to no truth to the satanic ritual abuse panic. The McMartin Preschool trial ended in 1990 with no convictions, even after the government threw more than \$15 million at prosecuting it. In 1992, FBI agent Kenneth Lanning, in his **report on satanic ritual abuse**, declared that satanic ritual abuse wasn’t credible: “Hundreds of communities all over America are run by mayors, police departments, and community leaders who are practicing Satanists and who regularly murder and eat people? Not likely.” Two years later, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, under the federal Department of Health and Human Services, released a report claiming that there was no evidence of truth in satanic ritual abuse claims. Even so, people still believed: A *Redbook* magazine survey conducted in 1994 found that fully 70 percent of Americans believed that satanic ritual abuse was real.

As with previous panics, the dangers may have been imaginary, but the consequences were not. The real toll of the satanic ritual abuse panic was on the children dragged into it and accused people like the Kellers, who numbered in the hundreds by the end of the decade. (In 1993, a survey by the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law found that 26 percent of prosecutors reported handling at least one case with elements of alleged ritual abuse.)

**It becomes
more
uncomfortable
to watch once**

Satanic ritual abuse was the thread that wound through the Kellers’ trial. Therapist David-Campbell testified for the prosecution that Christy’s acting out was consistent with children abused by satanic cults and that she believed Christy was telling the truth. A

the floppy rag dolls with floppy rag-doll genitalia come out.

ritual abuse “expert,” clinical psychologist Randy Noblitt, testified that satanic cults are real, that they are widespread, and that he too believed Christy, despite not having interviewed her. (As Hampton, the Kellers’ attorney, wrote in Fran Keller’s appeal, “In 2003, Noblitt was featured on ABC’s *Primetime* having a conversation with Satan who, Noblitt agreed, was actually a pretty nice guy, notwithstanding, of course, his role as the dark lord of evil. No court and no jury should ever rely on the testimony of Dr. Noblitt.”) In addition, the jury heard evidence that local graveyards had been “disturbed,” consistent with the children’s claims of impromptu exhumations, although the jury never heard that those disruptions included natural soil erosion.

Scott Taliaferro, assistant district attorney for Travis County, says that the prosecution’s case didn’t rest on satanic claims but on child abuse claims. He also says that the defense repeatedly raised the issue of satanic ritual abuse, likely in an effort to cast doubt on the claims of sex abuse in general. “This is a case where the state alleged aggravated sexual assault of a child ... the ritual abuse in question wasn’t elicited by the state; it was the defense. All of that is in large part extraneous to the allegation of sexual abuse,” said Taliaferro, who spoke with me before Fran Keller was released; he and the DA’s office have since declined to discuss the matter. But Hampton, the Kellers’ attorney, disagrees: Common sense and level-headed investigation would have found Christy’s claims incredible if satanic ritual abuse panic hadn’t lent a “distorted lens of hysteria” to the picture.

The methods used by forensic investigators to elicit stories of abuse from the children were taken straight from the ritual abuse panic playbook. University of Texas at El Paso psychologist James Wood, who has written about the **suggestive interviewing techniques used in the McMartin trial**, for a 1993 episode of *American Justice* viewed videos of investigators from the Travis County Sheriff’s Department **interviewing the young children** who made claims against the Kellers.

I have also seen the videos, seven in all, provided by sources close to the Keller case. At first glance, the videos look familiar for anyone who's a parent of a young child: Christy is 3 years old, and it's difficult to get her to sit still or remain on the chair or even in the room. Asking her basic questions is even harder: In one video, Christy turns her face petulantly into the back of the chair and says, "No, I'm not gonna talk!"

It becomes more uncomfortable to watch once the anatomically correct dolls, floppy rag dolls with floppy rag-doll genitalia, come out. The interviewer, armed with the now nude dolls, asks Christy to show her what "Danny" (Dan Keller) did to her at the day care. Christy is unwilling. "You tell me," Christy says. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to claim that in a way, Travis County forensic investigators and well-meaning therapists did.

In this particular segment, Christy's interviewer first calls attention to the dolls' genitalia and then says, "Show me what



happened at
the day

Photo by Meinzahn/iStock/Thinkstock

care”—implying both that something did happen and that the interviewer *knows* what happened involved genitalia. Then the interviewer asks if there’s a boy or a man at day care, leading Christy to say “Danny.” Handing her the doll, she says, “Show me what Danny does at the day care to Christy.” In an interview with another investigator present, the woman tells Christy, “I think you forgot to tell us about some things that happened ... about some stuff that you have to talk to me about that you told [therapist David-Campbell].”

Another child who was interviewed, a 5-year-old boy, is much more willing to talk, so willing, in fact, it’s strange. When the interviewer asks him what they’re here to talk about, he says matter-of-factly, “Yeah, Fran and Dan.” “What is it about Fran and Danny we need to talk about?” the interviewer asks. “The things that they did wrong ... at the time, we didn’t know that those things were wrong, but they were.” But even though he’s had some preparation, it’s impossible for the interviewer to get him to say that anything sexual had happened—no matter how much she tries.

"Does anybody touch your privates?"

"Uh-uh."

"Has anybody wanted you to touch their privates?"

"No."

Later:

"Are you telling me what really happened over at Fran and Danny's house?"

"Yes."

"Are you forgetting to tell me some stuff that happened?"

"Only the things I forgot."

"What are those things?"

"I can't remember!"

"Did anybody tell you not to remember?"

The implication is that the child isn't telling the full story, that he needs to keep trying until he gets it right—the kind of dynamic that Nathan, Wood, and others say enables children to come up with some of the strange allegations. In this case, the interviewer is steering the conversation toward something physical; the boy brings up things like Dan falling asleep in the toy room or allowing the children to ride on the riding mower, or that he heard that Dan shot a pit bull. Eventually, she says, "Would it be easier if you showed me what happened with the dolls?" later adding, "Remember we looked at the doll's penis; did anything happen with a penis?" When he says no, it's evident that she doesn't believe him.

These kinds of suggestive techniques were used throughout the questioning of the children in the Keller case, as they were in other satanic ritual abuse trials; by the time of the trial, allegations that emerged under questioning like this would form the basis of the prosecution's claims.

Assistant DA Taliaferro is right in pointing out that the Keller convictions weren't entirely about believing in satanic ritual abuse. They also relied on another piece of fantasy: the alleged physical evidence. This, too, was consistent with other satanic ritual abuse cases, where inaccurate physical evidence frequently played a major part in convincing otherwise skeptical juries.

Michael Mouw was the emergency-room doctor who examined Christy Chaviers after she told her mother that Dan Keller had abused her. Mouw testified during the trial that Christy's labia minora and hymen had appeared reddened and that he had observed some lacerations to the hymen. Those lacerations, he said at the time, were consistent with sexual abuse. Mouw's testimony was then taken as corroborating evidence that Christy had indeed been abused.

It isn't a vindication of justice; it's "I've stopped the continuation of an injustice."

Keith Hampton

Christy's "lacerations" were simply a natural formation of her genitalia. (Echoes of this junk science evidence are heard in the case of the **San Antonio Four**, four lesbians who were convicted and imprisoned for more than 15 years for the alleged sexual abuse of two young girls.)

Except his observations weren't evidence of abuse at all. Mouw has since recanted his testimony, declaring that he knew soon after the trial that his conclusion was inaccurate and "not scientifically or medically valid." At the time he examined her, he said during a hearing about the Kellers' appeal in August, he was an inexperienced emergency-room doctor who had little direct experience with or training to handle pediatric sexual abuse cases; subsequent research showed

"Sometimes it takes time to figure out what you don't know," **Mouw testified in August.** "I was mistaken."

And that was what finally freed the Kellers—that and the attention paid to the case by dogged *Austin Chronicle* reporter **Jordan Smith**, attorney Hampton's efforts, and the **support from the psychology community in Texas**. Travis County District Attorney Lehmberg agreed that Mouw's testimony had likely "affected the judgment of the jury" and violated the Kellers' right to a fair trial; she agreed that the Kellers should be freed on bond.

But recanting dubious medical evidence does not a declaration of innocence make. The next step for the Kellers is to hear the ruling of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. Lehmberg's office released **a statement on Nov. 26** indicating that no further action will be taken on the Kellers' cases until the court issues its review, essentially meaning that if the DA is planning to pursue a retrial, she's not saying. Even if the state doesn't

revisit the case, Hampton is still planning to press the Kellers' innocence claim, which will likely require litigation to achieve full exoneration for the couple. Exoneration will be both an emotional and practical victory: It will entitle the Kellers to money Texas pays to victims of wrongful conviction.

As far as we know, only one other person remains in prison on a conviction stemming from the satanic ritual abuse panic.

"Somebody needs to pay for this," says Donna Bankston, Fran Keller's daughter. Bankston wants her mother to be able to enjoy "what few years she has left" in peace and not have to work. But, Bankston added, "There's no amount of money that can bring back 23 years of their life ... there's no amount of money that can bring back all that hard time in prison."

And no matter how the satanic ritual abuse panic can be explained, it remains bewildering to people, like the Kellers, who lived through it. They're now trying to pick up the threads of lives that were lost more than two decades ago; Fran is staying with Bankston, while Dan is living with his sister. They're both in a kind of limbo—they're free but not, according to the state, innocent.

Hampton is cautiously optimistic that their exoneration will be successful and has somewhat muted feelings about getting them released. "It's not like the feeling of 'I just won a trial'—that's not the feeling. It isn't a vindication of justice; it's 'I've stopped the continuation of an injustice' instead of vindication," he said. "Maybe I'll feel differently if I get them exonerated. Maybe I'll feel it's really been righted."

Top Comment

"Mouw has since recanted his testimony, declaring that he knew soon after the trial that his conclusion was inaccurate and "not scientifically or medically valid." Are you %&\$ling kidding me, doc? [More...](#)

-SpartanTarget

As far as we know, only one other person remains in prison on a conviction stemming from the satanic ritual abuse panic: **Frank Fuster**, a Florida man who was convicted in 1985 on 14 counts of child sexual abuse in part on the evidence provided by his wife's supposedly recovered memories and sentenced to 165 years in prison. But, as Nathan pointed out, a number of cases where investigators were motivated by fears of satanic ritual abuse may have

457 Comments

Join In

simply flown under the radar. By the 1990s, prosecutors knew that satanic ritual abuse accusations could be used by the defense to cast doubt on charges, and they became more reluctant to air supposed evidence in court—instead, investigations that may have been launched on suspicions of ritual abuse were called “multivictim, multiperpetrator,” language that obscured the cases’ origins.

Though satanic ritual abuse cases are virtually unheard of now, the panic hasn’t entirely subsided. A number of groups and people still very much believe in satanic and other ritual abuse; Randy Noblitt, the expert witness called by the prosecution in the Kellers’ trial, is one of them (and he’s still **on faculty at Alliant International University**).

Even if most of us don’t believe Satan is lurking in day care centers, we’re not immune to the panic people felt. Nathan points to the outsize concern (disproportionate to their rarity) over child “predators” or the epidemic of teen sexting as potential modern panic candidates: “One of the hallmarks of a panic is that you don’t realize it’s a panic when you’re in the middle of it.”

NEWS & POLITICS

POLITICS

MAY 25 2015 7:18 PM

The Myth of the Hero Cop

Police officers earn more than you think for a job that’s less dangerous than you imagine.

David Feige

SLATE PLUS

DOUBLEX

MAY 26 2015 11:07 AM

That’s All She Wrote

Why I left ladyblogging.

Amanda Hess