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Oprah' to retell disturbing tale of minister's raping of teens

MetroWestDailyNews.com[Monday, September 26, 2005 21:31]

By Lisa Gentes

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey is revisiting the case of Mack W. Mitchell, the ousted Unitarian minister convicted and jailed in the early '90s of raping a Tibetan teen -- one of three young women he brought to the United States from refugee camps under the guise of a new life in America.

Carly Ubersox, spokesman for Harpo Productions, said Oprah interviewed Phuntsok Meston at a Chicago studio last week.

The show's theme is children being sold into sexual slavery, according to Ubersox. A broadcast date has not been set.

Meston is the only one of the three girls who testified against Mitchell, now 69. He had lived on Crawford Street in Northborough and was the pastor of Unitarian churches in Westborough and Northborough.

Mitchell's story made headlines in 1992, when he was accused of bringing three Tibetan teens from refugee camps to live in his Northborough farmhouse under the pre of saving them from poverty, educating them and introducing them to a new life in the United States.

Instead, he was charged with raping and molesting them. He later was convicted and served prison time.

Before being convicted and sentenced to prison, Mitchell told his congregants he had married one of the teens, who was 17 at the time. Meston is not the young woman Mitchell claimed to have married.

Ubersox would not comment on how Oprah heard of the local story, but the show did request archive articles from the MetroWest Daily News.

Singer Ricky Martin and TV reporter Christiane Amanpour are also part of the show, Ubersox said. Martin is president of the Ricky Martin Foundation, which advocates for stopping child slavery, and Amanpour has covered the topic for CNN.

Meston's husband, Daja Meston, said his wife was not ready to speak to the media but confirmed she had an interview with the "Oprah" show on Wednesday.

"We're just not ready to (speak) yet," he said in a telephone interview from his Auburndale home. "I think there will be time down the road, but we're just not ready yet."

Meston, along with her cousins Tsering Lha and Passang Tsering, were all alleged victims of the pastor.

Mitchell could not be reached for comment. Based on the testimony of Phuntsok Meston, Mitchell was convicted in June 1992 and served time at MCI-Concord.

He had been sentenced to 10-20 years in state prison after being convicted of two counts each of rape, unnatural rape, and indecent assault and battery, according to a July 1992 Daily News article.

Mitchell was released from prison in 1995, a spokesman for the state Department of Correction said. In January 1992, a Worcester County grand jury indicted him on 20 counts of

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rape, five counts of indecent assault and battery on a person over 14, and one count of assault and battery, according to old news reports.

A second alleged victim, Lha, the cousin of the victim who put Mitchell behind bars, would not testify in court. Those charges of rape and assault and battery were then dropped.

In 1992, the Unitarian Universalist Association removed Mitchell from his duties as pastor.

"On Nov. 18, 1992, the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee held a formal hearing on charges of conduct unbecoming a minister and voted to remove Mack Wallace Mitchell from ministerial fellowship," said Janet Hayes, information officer of Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston.

Former MetroWest Daily News columnist Tom Moroney covered the story in 1992.

His coverage began as a column on how Mitchell was writing a newsletter from his prison cell and charging subscribers \$15 a year. Once his column was published, Department of Correction officials ordered Mitchell to stop writing the newsletter, called "The Prison Years."

That column eventually led to Moroney's three-part series, "Faith Betrayed," on the imprisoned former minister, including interviews with a group of five congregation members who blew the whistle on the pastor, and one of the victims, whom he referred to by a pseudonym of Pema.

In 1992, Pema, who was brought to Northborough in 1985 from a Tibetan refugee camp in India, had testified Mitchell began raping her when she first arrived. She was 16.

She told Moroney in an interview that Mitchell raped her at night, leaving the bed where he slept with his then wife, sometimes tying her arms to the bedpost.

"It was so compelling, I knew it wasn't a column," Moroney said last week.

"It was a series about these people who looked up to the minister and discovered that he was a rapist and trafficker," said Moroney, who wrote for the News for more than a decade.

"I'll never forget this story," said Moroney, now co-host of "Simply Put," a political talk show on the Bloomberg Radio Network. "He'd go over to refugee camps and convince these fathers of these girls...and convince them that he'd take them to the U.S. and give them a new life."

"It was a 'great' story (in the sense) that it was all under cover, under the seemingly pillar of smalltown life," Moroney said.

He recalled the former minister as a "smooth character," a former town official, who got manicures and drove a fancy sports car. "He would never talk to me," Moroney said.

"It was one of the biggest stories I've covered," he said. "On the surface, everything seemed OK. This man came across as a real hero in some ways. But behind closed doors, he was a maniac, an evil person."

Lisa Gentes can be reached at 508-490-7461 or lgentes@cnc.com.



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