

**Inside the Stacks**

- ▶ [About Stacks](#)
- ▶ [Search tips](#)
- ▶ [Customer service](#)
- ▶ [Frequently asked questions](#)
- ▶ [Fees](#)
- ▶ [Terms & conditions](#)
- ▶ [New Search](#)

- ▶ [Stacks tracker](#)
- ▶ [Track your topics](#)

**Stories/Photos**

- ▶ [What's not in the Stacks](#)
- ▶ [Before there was Stacks](#)
- ▶ [Photo reprints](#)

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- ▶ [Publicity reprints](#)
- ▶ [Obituary help](#)
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**Options:**

[go to best part](#) | [printer format](#) | [results list](#) | [start a new search](#)

## SUNDAY UPDATE: Family heals wounds over molesting case, reaches out to others

**BYLINE:** By Margaret L. Knox Staff Writer

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SAVANNAH - Life was hard the year Larry and Betty Martin pressed charges against a **minister** of their church for sexually molesting their two sons.

The wounds of the trauma itself were fresh and raw, the legal and psychiatric expenses were gutting their bank accounts and the cold shoulder from many former friends in Clayton County was almost unbearable.

But after Jerry Sidell, the 26-year-old youth **minister** of the First Christian Church of Jonesboro, was convicted in the fall of 1983 after authorities said he confessed to molesting nine children, the Martins were confident the schism in their community would heal.

"I like my house. I like my neighbors. I don't want to be pushed out by anyone," Martin said at the time.

It didn't work out that way. While the **minister** is serving a 10-year prison sentence, the Martins have entered a kind of exile from their home of seven years.

They moved to a small duplex in Savannah last January, Martin said, because they "couldn't take the pressure." A rash of vandalism at their four-bedroom Jonesboro house, which had never before been disturbed, didn't help, he said.

"But we're not bitter," said Martin. Today, as founders of the Georgia state chapter of Society's League Against **Molestation**, the Martins consider that year a crucial part of their education. "When we reflect, some of the anger of those times comes through," he said. "But it's directed more now at how slowly it goes to make things better."

They are thinking as much these days about pending legislation, speaking engagements and other families' crises as they are about their own private horrors.

"In every mess there is a message," Mrs. Martin said. Through reading, course work and family therapy, she has become an expert of sorts on the myriad ramifications

of sexual **◀molestation▶**.

"Everybody hates a child molester until they know one," she said. "Usually, it's someone close, someone they love."

So it was with Sidell, who had helped many teens associated with the 400-member church through crises, Mrs. Martin said. "But that doesn't change what he did to those nine children."

The Martin children have coped with that period in different ways, she said. Their youngest son, now 14, and living with his natural mother in Atlanta, prefers to forget, for now. Their daughter, now 18, who was not molested but suffered with the rest of the family, chose to finish her senior year in Jonesboro.

The Martin's other son, Chad, who was molested for two years beginning at age 12, speaks on SLAM's behalf to college classes, mental health agencies and church groups. He said he is amazed at the number of teens who seek him out after such talks to confide similar experiences.

"I'll think about what happened to me for the rest of my life," said Chad, now 16, who was molested during overnight outings and while touring the Southeast with the church youth choir. "But I've come through it stronger. I can help others."

Guilt and despair drove him three times to attempt suicide before the **◀minister's** rape of his younger brother led him to confide in his father and break the cycle, he said.

Afterward, there were frightening appearances before three grand juries, he said. "Everyone asked, if I didn't enjoy it, why did I let it happen?"

Chad had stopped growing physically during the two years he was molested, his parents said. In the two years since then, he has grown 13 inches, to a lean 5 feet 6 inches tall. He earns good grades again, in advanced placement courses, and is president of the Jenkins High School debating team.

"I'm going to be a lawyer, maybe a prosecuting attorney or a Supreme Court justice or congressman," he said, smiling.

The Martins have written to some of their former friends at the Jonesboro church, asking forgiveness if feelings were hurt, and trying to clear up what they say is a misperception that they sued the church. They say they only sued Sidell, in a case which the jury decided in their favor but which was later overturned.

They also have written to Sidell at the Dodge County Correctional Institute, they said, explaining why they pressed charges.

Child molesting "is like alcoholism, an incurable disorder which (the molester) has to fight every day," said Mrs. Sidell, who is pressing for better rehabilitation programs for child molesters. The Martins also want special training for officials who deal with victims.

As for the public, Martin said, "The only real key to stopping this kind of crime is through education."



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