

Tales of horror in Sex crimes victimizing children rock community's foundations

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GREENWOOD — The arrest of a respected Hispanic ministry pioneer and trusted elementary school library aide for a stunning series of sexual molestations, plus the heart-wrenching accounts of young victims, have shaken the foundations of a number of Greenwood institutions.

Since the arrest of Lujon Augustin Fernando Garcia, 42, more than three weeks ago residents have lashed out in shock, revulsion, anger and disappointment.

Not within the memory or records of law enforcement officials have sexual molestation charges been so pervasive and disturbing to Greenwood, yet they focus on a single individual.

"Even though these crimes were the actions of one man who apparently acted alone, many people seem embarrassed because of how this reflects on the community," Police Chief Gerald Brooks said.

BOND WAS increased to \$3 million Wednesday for Garcia when he was charged with a fourth count of criminal sexual conduct with a minor, allegedly videotaping himself fondling and performing a sex act on a 13-year-old boy.

Police identified the child through a videotape earlier this week.

Including his May 9 arrest, Greenwood police have charged Garcia with four counts of lewd acts on a minor and three counts of criminal sexual conduct with a minor.

Sheriff's deputies have also charged him with criminal sexual conduct with a minor.

Officers seized more than a dozen videotapes from a locked box in Garcia's office at the Abbeville Baptist Association at 310 Panola Ave. in Greenwood. They also searched Garcia's Greenwood home and his office at East End Elementary School.

THE TAPES "clearly" depict Garcia involved in acts with children, Brooks said.

"I can't find the words to describe how horrible and dreadful it is to have to watch those tapes," the chief said. "Many officers are having trouble sleeping at night. You can turn off the tape, but you can't get these images out of your mind."

Although the task of identifying victims from the tapes is arduous, Brooks said his investigators are committed to doing their job.

"They should finish reviewing the tapes this weekend and have still-frame images of each child to refer back to in their files, that way, they won't have to keep watching the tapes," Brooks said.

Each officer is dealing with the stress of the case in "his or her own way," Brooks said.

But the department has access to counseling and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Officers' Chaplaincy Program if needed.

FROM NOV. 4, 1998 until May 8, Garcia was employed by Greenwood School District 50, and worked as a library aide at East End Elementary.

Prior to school dismissing for the summer on May 19, East End Elementary Principal Jane Calhoun said faculty and staff were fielding "a lot of questions" from students about Garcia and his arrest.

"Many students just needed someone to talk to," Calhoun said. "And several staff members have utilized counseling services as well, to help them work through this."

Some 165 students return to campus Memorial Day to begin summer school, which runs through June 23.

"Things have actually been rather calm the last few days and we're looking forward to having students again," Calhoun said. "This incident has caused us to end the year with great concern, and I want everyone to know we are concerned about the safety of children.

"We want to make sure parents and children know services are available to them and how to access those services."

MARTHA VINCENT, District 50 director of staff development and evaluation, said the district's primary focus right now is to make sure that children, families and employees get the counseling they need.

"It's been a very difficult time, especially for those at East End, and we're patiently working through feelings," Vincent said. "It's understandable that some people are angry and need a way to vent those feelings."

Responding to critics who say its employee screening process isn't adequate, despite the fact that it includes a state criminal background check that came back clear for Garcia, the district has begun reviewing its process, Vincent said.

"We will continue to be as careful as we can in our hiring practices," she said.

SUSAN FREEMAN, treatment director for the Sexual Trauma and Counseling Center, said it's not unusual for child molesters to "not get caught, or have dozens of victims before they do."

Police and sheriff's reports said incidents with children from age four to 13 involve fondling, oral and anal sex.

Of the eight victims identified thus far, police said victims are predominantly Hispanic or white males, but some females also have appeared on videotapes.

"We deal with molestation every day, but we don't often have a group of children molested by the same person," Freeman said.

"Those who molest children are very good at keeping kids quiet through giving them gifts and making them feel special."

Police and sheriff's reports said Garcia sometimes asked children if they wanted to go get a hamburger or a movie, before he offered to take them somewhere.

A **NATIVE** of Chihuahua, Mexico, Garcia came to Greenwood on April 1, 1998, to start a Hispanic ministry at the invitation of the 47-church member Abbeville Baptist Association.

"I'm brokenhearted over what this has done to the Hispanic community," said Wallace Hughes, the association's director of missions. "A trust was broken — the Hispanic population is dealing with a lot of anger — and everything regarding our Hispanic ministry is on hold right now.

"All of our churches were in the process of raising money to build a church for the ministry, and we would've likely had a groundbreaking this summer."

Despite thwarted plans, Hughes said the association isn't about to "let one man destroy" what's been in the making for about three years.

TUESDAY, HUGHES is to meet with a Hispanic minister from Greenville who plans to ask the local Hispanic population what the future of the ministry should be.

"We don't want to decide anything until we get some feedback," Hughes said. "This pastor came here three years ago and surveyed Hispanics about whether they wanted such a ministry."

But Hughes said the healing process has already started somewhat.

"The people of our 47 churches are overwhelmingly supporting the association," he said. "I can't say enough about them. People are praying for us, calling us and sending us letters, cards e-mails and flowers.

"People know the association had no knowledge of this and had nothing to do with it."

CHILDREN, FAMILIES the school district, churches, counselors and law enforcement have all come under criticism because of the shocking nature of the allegations.

So, too, has *The Index-Journal*.

“It has been a very difficult story to report because of the horrendous allegations by the most sympathetic of victims: our children,” said Robert Bentley, executive news editor.

“It didn’t suffice to simply cite police reports alleging ‘criminal sexual acts’ or ‘molestation,’ which can mean fondling, when the alleged incidents were of a far more severe nature,” he said. “Yet it was disturbing to readers when they were informed that the charges specifically included incidents of forced oral and anal sex.

“It is an extremely sensitive issue that all but defies sensitivity if it is reported in an accurate, thorough manner.

“Perhaps readers should consider that explicit accounts of such allegations can serve to warn children and parents of the deceptive methods and insidious practices of pedophiles.

“If such information could spare the victimization a single child, that would be more than an adequate tradeoff for criticism of upsetting reports,” Bentley said.