

Brockville's local paper was advised not to publish abuse allegations

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The staff of Brockville's newspaper knew nearly 20 years ago of allegations of religious cult practices at Grenville Christian College but backed off from publishing an article because of legal threats and sources who changed their minds about allowing their names to be used.

Hunter Grant, former co-publisher of the Brockville Recorder and Times, said Friday that not getting the story into print was his biggest disappointment in the 30 years he ran what was then his family-owned daily.

The paper had assigned a reporter, Mike Moralis, to investigate both the school and the Community of Jesus in Massachusetts with which the school's staff had close ties.

Mr. Grant's own children had attended the school and heard firsthand the stories of bizarre and harsh discipline to which many students were subjected. His daughter Meredith had experienced the so-called light sessions at which students were set on stools in dark rooms while staff yelled at them that they were sinners.

But just before the newspaper was about to publish its findings, members of the school community who previously had agreed to be quoted began telephoning the paper to say their names could not be used. The newspaper's lawyers said that without the names they should not risk publication.

“We had thought that finally the place would become known for what it is . . . [but] virtually every person we interviewed got cold feet, terrified of repercussions against either the kids or the parents, which meant we had no quoted sources to support and verify our claims.”

And at the same time, Mr. Grant said, the paper received a letter from a major Toronto law firm threatening libel action on behalf of school authorities if any article saw print.

He said he remembered being astonished at how “a quaint little group of people, these Christians” who ran Grenville, could find their way to a high-priced powerful law firm in Toronto.

He was also astounded, he said, by how the school managed to surround itself with lieutenant-governors of Ontario, a former high-ranking diplomat and well-regarded local lawyers who “had absolutely no idea what was going on inside the walls of that institution.”

“If only people had been willing to be quoted in 1989, allowing Mike's work to be published, maybe some of those damaged could have been spared,” he said.

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