

# Children of God cult was 'hell on earth'

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 [bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-44613932](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-44613932)

By Steven Brocklehurst BBC Scotland News



Image caption Verity Carter was abused from the age of four

Verity Carter says growing up in a secretive cult that encouraged sexual contact between adults and children was "hell on earth".

The 38-year-old says she was abused from the age of four by members of the Children of God cult, including her own father.

Alexander Watt was convicted in February after admitting four charges of sexually abusing Verity and another child in Renfrewshire and on the east coast of Scotland in the 1980s.

Verity told BBC Scotland's [Kaye Adams Programme](#): "He wasn't the only one who did things to me when I was growing up.

"I had much worse done to me by many others."

"There was a bit of closure in him getting a conviction but at the same time it felt like I wanted more."

She said she hoped her father's conviction would encourage others to come forward to expose the actions of the cult in Scotland.

## 'Free love'

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The Children of God began in the United States in the late 1960s.

Its founder, David Berg, told members that God was love and love was sex, so there should be no limits, regardless of age or relationship.

"It actively encouraged sexual activities among minors as young as two or three years old," Verity says.

Berg's cult spread and claimed to have 10,000 full-time members in 130 communities around the world by the 1970s.

Hollywood stars Rose McGowan and Joaquin Phoenix were born into the cult.

Rose McGowan doc: Weinstein referenced as 'monster'

In Scotland, it operated at sites in Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire, Ayrshire and Edinburgh.

Both Verity's parents were active members when she was born.



Image copyright Getty Images

Image caption Rose McGowan went on a press tour for her documentary series in January

As well as sexual abuse, Verity says she was repeatedly beaten and whipped for the smallest of transgressions.

"It became hell on earth for anyone born into it," she says.

"It happened a step at a time and many of the adults did not see how extreme it had got until it was too late.

"A lot of parents did leave and take their kids out."

Her own father left the cult when she was about nine, but Verity and her siblings remained inside with their mother.

There were heavy consequences if you failed to keep that smile and say the things you were meant to say

At first they were not living in a commune, but instead in a small flat in Paisley.

However, they lived a commune lifestyle

"We had no contact with the outside world," Verity says.

"We did not have music or television or culture. We had no idea how the world worked."

Although Verity and her siblings received no formal education, they were taught survival skills and how to keep secrets from the "systemites" in the outside world, especially social workers.

## 'Alternative belief'

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"There were heavy consequences if you failed to keep that smile and say the things you were meant to say," she says.

They were told that terrible things would happen to them and their siblings if there was bad publicity for the group.

Her mother and father claimed to be Christian missionaries as a cover for their activities, Verity says, and she was forced on to the streets to trick people into donating money.

I wasn't comfortable with the things being done to me but if I asked a question I got beaten or put on silence restriction

"People did not question it because nobody wants to be accused of being prejudiced against someone who wants an alternative belief system," she says.

Verity says she had very little formal education but was very good at "reading" people and manipulating them.

She says her days with the cult were very regimented and "any signs of imagination" would be beaten out of her.

"There was sexual abuse for myself from the age of four, not just from my dad who got convicted, but from various other members of the cult, some related, some not.

"I wasn't comfortable with the things being done to me but if I asked a question I got beaten or put on silence restriction.

"I was punished a lot because I was never able to stop asking questions."

## Outside world

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Verity says she was living in communes full-time from 11 or 12 until she "escaped" at the age of 15.

She says she had reached the stage where she no longer cared what happened to her and refused to submit to the cult's punishments.

"When I got out it was because it no longer mattered if death waited for me in the outside world because I already wanted to die, so how much worse could it be?" she says.

At first she went to live with her father and liked the fact he was spending money on her.

"I think he was trying to compensate for the past," she says.

"I did approach him about the past and he told me he was sorry and it was all down to the cult's teachings."

However, when he "invaded" her personal space she says she gave him a black eye and moved out.

"I was living on my own before I was 16 in a bedsit, where they did not ask any questions," she says.

"There was a lot to get used to. I knew nothing. I made a lot of mistakes and I wasn't perfect.

"To be perfectly honest, for a good few years I went off the rails. I was trying to understand this whole alien world I wasn't prepared for."

She says she has suffered depression and suicidal thoughts as well as nightmares and insomnia.

"I spent years on significant levels of drugs and alcohol to try to erase my past," she says.

For many years she believed she could not speak out because her siblings were still on the inside of the cult.

But about seven years ago she decided to tell the truth about what had happened to her.

She said the court case brought out more about her father's abuse than she had known.

"He also did not acknowledge the wrongness of what he had done in the past," she says.

"He does not seem to understand the impact it had. I thought he understood that."

## 'Still supports'

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Her mother is still an active member of the cult, which now goes by the name of The Family International.

The BBC asked them for a statement but did not receive a response.

Verity does not speak to her mother but she does now have "really good relationships" with four brothers and two sisters who are outside the cult.

She says her hope is that one day there will be more people coming forward to acknowledge what was going on.

Verity says people told her for years that she was "crazy" and the abuse did not happen.

"Just having it acknowledged is a really big deal," she says.

"That in itself will bring overwhelming amounts of closure to so many people."

Police Scotland confirmed an inquiry into the Children of God cult was ongoing.

A Police Scotland spokeswoman said: "We would encourage anybody who has been the victim of abuse to contact the police.

"Across Police Scotland we have specialist officers who will listen and robustly investigate reports of child abuse no matter who was involved, where it took place or when it happened."