

A survivor

"Basically, I got voted off the island because I didn't sell enough *Watchtowers*," says Danny Haszard, a former Jehovah's Witness who now lives in Bangor. He grew up believing that the end of the world was around the corner, but now, as he pickets a downtown street corner, he's got a very different, and very angry, story to tell.

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This is ...

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MAINE TIMES

'Nobody likes Jehovah's Witnesses except other Jehovah's Witnesses'

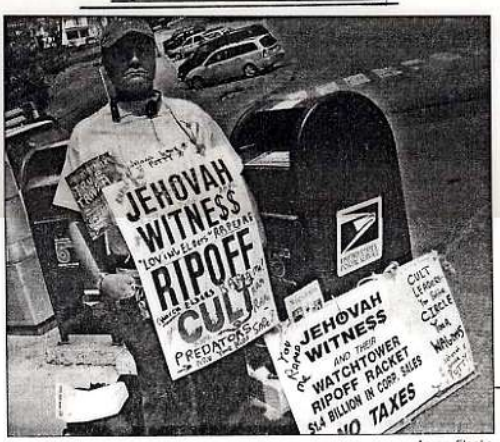
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Danny Haszard is a third-generation Jehovah's Witness. He grew up believing the end of the world was just around the corner. Worldly concerns were unimportant — getting braces on his teeth, accepting his developing sexuality, finishing high school and even treating his ulcerative colitis took a back seat to the sureness of the rapture ahead. But a few years back, Haszard began to question the teachings of his church, and he ultimately left the spiritual community altogether. Since then, he says, he's been shunned; he thinks his mother died recently in Florida, but he has been unable to make contact with church members or his family. "Basically, I got voted off the island because I didn't sell enough *Watchtowers*," he says. Now, angry, sick and on a mission, he stages a one-man picket on a noisy corner across from Bangor's City Hall.

On a sunny morning shortly before Mother's Day, we sat on a wooden bench and talked as the traffic roared by.

Maine Times: I don't know much about Jehovah's Witnesses. They come to my door once in a while and talk with me about my religious beliefs.

Danny Haszard: Let me guess. You know they don't give blood and they don't celebrate Christmas and that's about it, right? Which is the great paradox, because they claim that they are the evangelists of the world, but for all the preaching and teaching they do, practically nobody knows anything about their teachings.



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Q: After a lifetime of Jehovah's Witness, how did you move beyond those teachings?

A: I figured out that their teachings were just so much convoluted cult trappings. The thing that really saved me was this: When you get disengaged from a cult, you're brainwashed that you're doomed. They brainwashed me that I was like Judas Iscariot — Judas betrayed his master, and now there's only one thing for you to do and that's to go off and hang yourself. For three years I was so shackled and chained to them I was afraid to tell the mental health people why I was depressed and suicidal. Then I looked up a cult support group, and I walked into the meeting and there were all these ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, ex-Scientologists, ex-Moonies, and I realized I identified with them. We're all cut from the same cloth, all come from the same pedigree. And it opened up my eyes. You can't attack any cult because they're brainwashed to not listen to anything negative. Jehovah's Witnesses will take all the bashing they can hear about Moonies and Scientologists because "Oh, they're a cult" — but then when you think about their fundamental dynamics and how they operate, you realize Jehovah's Witnesses are just like that.

Q: Why don't they celebrate Christmas?

A: The same reason a lot of Christians don't celebrate Christmas. Christmas is a pagan celebration; it preceded Christ. It's the pagan festival of the Saturnalia, the return of the unconquered son. They recognize that and I give them credit for it. But, see, that's how psychopaths work; they lie 80 percent of the time and have incredible, astounding candor the other 20 percent. So you figure, when you hear them tell the absolute total truth, "There must be something wrong with my head, I've been misjudging them, I've been imputing wrong motive. Because they told the truth this time, they must be telling the truth all the other times, too." That's the psychopath dynamic.

MAINE INTERVIEW

By MEG HASKELL
Staff Writer

Q: When I was working as a visiting nurse, I took care of a guy with uncontrolled diabetes, and it was killing him. He was a Jehovah's Witness, and he told me it didn't really matter whether he controlled his disease because his religion taught him that everything's just temporary anyway. I never saw anybody living in such complete poverty; he couldn't afford the food or medicine he needed, and he refused to accept any kind of assistance. But he had this stack of new books he had bought from the church. He was a man without education or sophistication.

A: That's another part of the cult dynamic: They exploit minorities and ignorance. Enlightened aristocrats are, as they say, "goat-like"; they're not receptive to the Kingdom Message. A few years ago, the Haitians who were impounded at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba, 80 percent of them were Jehovah's Witnesses. The church said, "See, they're downtrodden, they're more receptive to the good news, they're more sheep-like." But they just exploit minorities, that's what happens.

Q: Tell me about the situation with your mother.

A: My parents were Jehovah's Witness missionaries, and when I was born they were reviled for having a baby because the end of the world was coming any day; the preaching work has to get priority. My father married my mother after he met her family when he was going door-to-door. She was 17, he was 27. She was worse than legally blind. They married and it was hell. He was a rotten husband. He was a psychopath because he was a Jehovah's Witness. I was a Jehovah's Witness, too. I was a good-looking boy. I had all these girls chasing me, but I had to suppress my sex drive because any day the end of the world's coming and I'm going to get delivered and I decided the thing to do was to live with my parents even though it sucked. When I was 30, my mother up and moved to Florida. In 1997 I heard a rumor that she had Alzheimer's disease, that she didn't recognize any of her children. She must be deceased by now; I've never been able to find out.

Q: You also allege that you were raped in the church.

A: I was raped by church elders. In the Jehovah's Witnesses, if there's an internal problem, you're not supposed to go to the police first. You have to go to the elders and they judge the situation, and if the offender is excommunicated and is considered to be no longer a Jehovah's Witness, then you can go to the police. What happens is that if something is really scandalous, they just cover it up and say, "Wait on Jehovah; he'll solve your problems, don't worry about it." They claim they have a protocol for dealing with complaints, but they don't utilize it unless it's to their advantage.

Q: You are billing yourself as an exit counselor for Jehovah's Witnesses. When you're out here picketing, has there been interest from people who want to leave the church?

A: Yes, one ex-member approached me; it had taken her five years to get deprogrammed. And the pastor from this [Unitarian] church came over and chatted with me. She said she had counseled other Jehovah's Witnesses who had left. Nobody likes Jehovah's Witnesses except other Jehovah's Witnesses.

Half the city councilors know me by name. The cops all know me as a safe person. The mental health system knows me. If [the Jehovah's Witnesses] say, "Well, this guy's crazy, he's a mental case," — well, yeah, I've got a mental health history. It was caused by them.

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