

# Siblings Sue Jehovah's Witnesses Over Alleged Child Sex Abuse

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By Dave Altimari



Evelyn Selimaj, 30, (at left) of East Haven and her sister Sybelle Almodovar, 35, of North Guilford hold a photograph of themselves together with their brother Ferdinand Almodovar. (Patrick Raycraft)

Three siblings allege in lawsuits that they were sexually abused by a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization when they were children living in New Haven.

The lawsuits, filed in New Haven Superior Court, allege that the siblings from the Almodovar family were sexually abused over a five-year period starting in 1988 by Orlando Afanador, a "ministerial servant." Their lawyers say it is the first lawsuits filed in Connecticut against the religious organization.

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On Wednesday, sisters Sybelle Almodovar and Evelyn Selimaj attended a press conference held by their attorneys, Irwin Zalkin of San Diego and Thomas McNamara of New Haven, to announce the lawsuits against the East Spanish Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses New

Haven and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. A spokesman for the organization had no comment.

Their brother, Ferdinand Almodovar, also filed suit. McNamara said a fourth lawsuit alleging similar claims of sexual abuse by Afanador will be filed for Bianca Martinez, another former New Haven resident.

Afanador is on the state sexual offender registry. The registry indicates he was convicted of sexual assault of a child in Omaha, Nebraska in August of 2010 and was released from prison in January of 2013. It indicates he currently lives in New Haven. He could not be reached for comment.

Zalkin said that, while the lawsuits are the first in Connecticut, there is a growing number of complaints being filed across the country against the Jehovah's Witnesses organization. Zalkin filed a lawsuit Tuesday in Vermont for two woman who alleged they were sexually abused in that state.

"This is an insidious problem, an epidemic problem with child sex abuse within this organization that so far seems more concerned about protecting its reputation from scandal than about the children," Zalkin said.

Zalkin likened the burgeoning sexual abuse scandal in the Jehovah's Witnesses to similar to what occurred in the Catholic Church in the 1990's with one difference.

"At least when the scandal broke in the Catholic Church they took some action. These guys are just the opposite," Zalkin said.

The Almodovar family were members of the East Spanish Congregation in the mid-1980's when the alleged sexual abuse occurred.

The lawsuit claims that Afanador and his wife moved into the Almodovar home following the divorce of the children's parents to help care for the three siblings. Seybelle Almodovar said her mother was a nurse at the time working third shift and she rented the attic space to the couple with the understanding they would baby sit.

The lawsuits allege that the accused started abusing Sybelle when she was 8 while he was babysitting. Her lawsuit alleges he would enter her room in the middle of the night and abuse her. Her sister Evelyn, who was 6 at the time, was also in the room and could see and hear what he was doing, the lawsuit alleges

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The lawsuits allege that Afanador abused Ferdinand on more than 25 occasions by forcing the boy to perform oral sex on him.

In the case of Bianca Martinez her family lived in the same apartment building as Afanador and she was friends with his son. The lawsuit alleges when she was 9 she was abused on the family's couch numerous times.

In a statement she read at the press conference, Evelyn Almodovar Selimaj said the family moved to the Dominican Republic where the sisters eventually told the Elders in the Jehovah's Witness congregation they joined in that country about the abuse, but nothing was done.

"We are not the first and we are not the last ones that he abused," Selimaj said. "While we cannot get our childhood back one thing we hope this lawsuit will do is prevent another child from the devastation we faced."