Breaking Free Of A Cult Religion

He Was A Jehovah’s Witness For 30 Years

By David Ettinger

For 30 years, the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses were not only a way of believing, but also a way of life for First Orlando member Carl Mickens. He was 14 when he joined the Watchtower Society, and was a firm adherent to all they advocated.

“We [Carl and wife Gail] raised our family within that religious system. I was a minister and often instructed the people how to witness for their faith because we believed that to be outside this denomination meant being without God’s approval and, ultimately, eternal death,” Carl said.

Twenty-seven years ago, Carl became one of those outsiders, but only after his long marriage to the errant religion.

Though born in Hollywood, California, Carl bounced around from parent to parent after they divorced. His various moves took him to Jacksonville, Florida; Detroit, Michigan; and back to California. It was there, at the age of 14, that he first had contact with the religion that would dominate the next three decades of his life. “I was visiting with my father and stepmother when some Jehovah’s Witnesses came to their door and got them interested in a home Bible study,” Carl recalled. “Whenever I visited my father, I would sit in on the study. I found this very exciting because it was the first time I actually had the Bible presented to me.”

But what was presented was not the whole truth. “I had visited other churches when I was younger, but during Sunday school class, the Bible was never taught to me. So, I never really had a chance to know the difference — I really didn’t know what the Gospel was and what other churches taught. I just knew the Bible according to the Watchtower organization.”

Carl grew quickly in his new religion. By the time he was 17, he was asked to lecture at local JW meeting places; by 18, he had become a guest speaker in the Los Angeles area and was in charge of study groups. But before that, at age 16, something happened that changed the course of his life. “In 1953, my father and I went to a [JW] convention in New York,” Carl said. “There, I met a girl named Gail who was from Florida. We hit it off and became pen pals.”

That lasted for two years. Shortly after high school graduation in 1955, Carl moved to Florida, dated Gail, and then married her in 1956. The two then moved back to California. Over the years, four children would follow: Renee, Leslie, Christopher and Derick. Carl made his living in the aerospace industry as a technical illustrator for maintenance manuals followed by a stretch selling advertising. But what he really wanted to do was missionary work. “We and a couple of other families planned to buy a schooner and sail to the South Pacific, specifically, Tonga and the Cook Islands. We wanted to be a floating congregation,“ Carl said. “We wrote to the Watchtower headquarters in Brooklyn [N.Y.], but they discouraged us from doing it. They don’t want anyone doing anything outside of their leadership. It was actually a good thing, because none of us knew what we were doing; we probably would have been killed at sea.”

So Carl waited for another opportunity, which came in 1969. “Some friends back East told us that there were a lot of small [JW] congregations that needed help.”

That was enough for Carl. He accepted the challenge and the family moved to the Lake George area of Upstate New York. “We enjoyed living there, especially going door-to-door to the mountain people,” said Carl, who was eking out a living as a sign painter. “But as much as we liked New York, it was hard to get work. I was barely making ends meet.”

So, in 1971, the Mickens headed back to California, where Carl eventually got a job at Disney Land. He also took a step up the JW ladder by being named an elder in 1972. It was not long after that Carl began having doubts about the religion he was so immersed in. “By 1975, I was rotated out [as an elder] and that gave me a little more freedom to think. I started having theological questions,” he said. “I wanted to know more about God’s judgment. The religion believes that only Jehovah’s Witnesses can be saved. I would be driving down the Ventura Freeway, see families in cars and think, ‘Oh Lord, if they don’t hear my message about coming into the Jehovah’s organization, then they’re going to die an everlasting death.’ I couldn’t believe that my God was that kind of God.”

Over the next seven years — including 1979’s move to Orlando where Carl and Gail began working at Disney World — Carl continued to question and investigate, including listening to Christian tapes given to him by evangelical friends. “I was really getting charged up by these tapes. They were exciting. Then I’d go to our [JW] meetings and realize how dull and dense they were. I started seeing a real difference.”

So Carl began reading those books of the Bible — Romans, Galatians and Ephesians—that talk about the Christian’s freedom in Christ. “I started looking at the spiritual aspects of religion. Jehovah’s Witnesses just focus on the physical — our works — not the inward, but the outward. That really started bothering me.”

Many other inconsistencies bothered Carl, as well, but he repressed it. “I said, ‘Where else am I going to go? This is my life. I can’t just walk away.’ Because when you do walk away, all your bridges are burned and all your friends and family are on the other side of that bridge.”

But even that hindrance could no longer hold Carl back. “I finally realized that God’s grace was far more reaching than the Jehovah’s Witnesses had taught.”

So, in 1982, Carl gave his life to Jesus Christ. “When I finally realized that Jesus was God in the flesh, everything showered down on me,” he said. “It finally all made sense.”

Meanwhile, Gail was much slower to come around. “Whenever I wanted to visit churches, she would say, ‘I want nothing to do with false religions.’ ” Eventually, though, Gail did come around and also gave her life to Christ.

But there was fallout.

“When I resigned from the Watchtower organization, I sent out a six-page letter explaining my position to about 100 families in California,” Carl said. One of those families belonged to his older daughter, Renee. “As soon as that letter hit town, the elders went to my daughter and said, ‘If you ever talk to your father, you will be disfellowshiped.’ She listened to them.”

Since 1982, the Mickens have seen Renee only once — for three hours at the 1996 funeral of Carl’s mother. “If I saw Renee on the street now, I wouldn’t even recognize her.”

Fortunately, though, the three other Mickens children no longer belong to the JWs and have a loving relationship with their parents. And regarding Renee, there has been a breakthrough of sorts. “One of her daughters, Harmony, who is 21, has left the organization. So, we have finally gotten to know her.”

And over the past 27 years, Carl has consistently gotten to know his Lord and Savior better and better and seeks to bring others to the same knowledge. “Ever since 1982, I’ve spoken on and given classes about the Jehovah’s Witnesses and cults,” he said. “I often ask myself why the Lord allowed me to stay 30 years in the Watchtower organization. There’s a reason. My calling is to teach the church an awareness about the cults.”