

Testimony for HB35 – James Renner

My name is James Renner. I am a journalist and author, mostly known for writing true crime. I am also a survivor of abuse by members of the Boy Scouts of America and I am speaking today in support of HB35.

Before I tell my story I want to share one fact with you. I have heard the Boy Scout sexual abuse scandal compared in scope to the recent abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. It is, in fact, exponentially worse. The Catholic Church represents a specific set of people in this country but the Boy Scouts are this country. It doesn't matter what denomination you are, joining Boy Scouts is just something American boys do. The John Jay Report, which quantified cases against the Catholic Church, logged about 11,000 victims in the U.S. So far, over 92,000 scouts have filed abuse claims against the Boy Scouts of America. And let me tell you, for every scout who is speaking out, there are many, many others staying silent.

My first sexual encounter took place at Seven Ranges Boy Scout Reservation, just three months after I turned eleven. When I was seventeen, I returned to Seven Ranges to work as a camp counselor. A few months into the summer, an adult staff member sexually assaulted a teenage boy there. The assault went on through the night and was particularly violent. The next day, the staff leader drove home and committed suicide.

Seven Ranges is the largest Boy Scout camp in Ohio and should serve as a shining example of the organization in our state. However, the example it sets is a dangerous one. For decades,

Buckeye Council leaders have maintained and operated a secret society that creates a culture of secrecy and fear that presents opportunities for pedophiles to abuse children there.

They call this society “Pipestone,” and refer to it as a honors program but as a former participant I can tell you there is no honor involved. On Friday nights, scouts as young as eleven are led into the woods after dark. In the past they have been beaten for failing to run fast enough or to stay silent. The boys are taken to a ceremonial rings surrounded by the skulls of dead animals where adult, white men misappropriate the culture of the Lakota people and pretend to be Native Americans. These men, often scout leaders from nearby Troops, paint themselves in red face and dress in nothing but small loin cloths.

These boys are forced to kneel between the legs of the Chief and to peer inside a human skull to find the first password for Pipestone, which is “Secrecy.” They are forced to drink Bitrex, a bitter chemical. And afterward, the Chief gives a lecture about the importance of secrets.

When I was a scout, the Chief of Pipestone gave a lecture to fourth year candidates about the dangers of masturbation and how homosexuality was immoral.

In 1995, a Pipestone leader took me and four other teenage boys into a sweat lodge that was built behind the Pipestone facilities. This man was named Jim Mills. He told us to strip naked and sit by the fire. Afterward, he held a gravity shower bag out of the bag of his van and had us wash in front of him. Years later, he was charged with child sex crimes in federal court. On the day his

trial was to begin he committed suicide. Buckeye Council and Seven Ranges did not even offer an apology.

I am friends with several victims of Jim Mills. We are in our mid-40s now and many of us suffer from substance abuse issues, alcoholism, and depression because of his actions. I am able to function but others of us cannot function at all. Some can't pull it together to file for the benefits offered by the bankruptcy court.

And even after this epic scandal and resulting bankruptcy, Buckeye Council continues to operate this secret society at Seven Ranges. This organization has learned nothing from its mistakes. HB35 sends a clear message – there are consequences for neglecting the safety of our children and they can no longer rely on the statute of limitations to protect their self-interests.

Thank you.

James Renner

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