More than a dozen women across the US say a New York Christian camp leader abused them as teens

Church leaders, Christian camp heads and the pastor himself were confronted with concerns about his conduct at least 20 times since 1997.

Sarah Tishkun and Kenyale Wheeler USA TODAY NETWORK

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Wayne Aaron was the first man Joy McCullough ever held hands with.

It was 1987, and Aaron was her youth pastor. She was 13, and he told her she was amazing.

Nineteen years later, in 2006, at a Christian children's camp in western New York, 16-year-old Laura Snell stumbled a bench facing Aaron, who was now the camp's president. They were seated off to the side in the dining hall, while a few other people milled around. He suggested they pray.

He ran his hands over her shoulders and up her thigh, toward her crotch, and slid his fingers against her outer labia. Snell felt confused, she recalls; no one had ever touched her like that.

"I honestly didn't even know what was happening to me," said Snell, now 31. "He was definitely grooming me. … I didn't realize how absolutely brainwashing it was."

Laura Snell, 31, told the USA TODAY Network that Wayne Aaron inappropriately touched her while Snell was on staff at Circle C Ranch in New York in the mid-2000s.
GEORGE SUGARMAN/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

A USA TODAY Network investigation found that Aaron, 55, touched at least 16 teenage girls inappropriately, some on multiple occasions, according to their firsthand accounts.

His roles in youth pastor at The Chapel, a Buffalo-area church, in the vapor and then as president at Circle C Ranch in rural Western New York provided him in close proximity to dozens of girls – particularly youth group members from area churches, and camp staff members.

That access, and Aaron's presence as an authority figure in a Christian setting, helped foster the girls' spiritual and emotional dependence on him, clearing the way for further manipulation and inappropriate behavior, said Cheryl Chambers, a licensed mental health counselor with Christian Counseling Ministries of Western New York.

The Chapel, Circle C Ranch
GEORGE SUGARMAN/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Fourteen women across the U.S. shared their stories on the record for this report; two others declined to share their names publicly but said they experienced similar conduct. Nineteen others – 14 of them speaking on the record, including former camp staff members, their family members and pastors in the region — said they personally witnessed Aaron's actions, or heard about them from staff or loved ones.

Leadership at both The Chapel and Circle C Ranch, and also Aaron himself, have been confronted with concerns about his conduct at least 20 times since 1997, according to excerpts from Aaron's employee personnel file at The Chapel, and interviews with youth group members at The Chapel, Circle C staff and pastors in the western New York area.

Several of these individuals specifically said Aaron did not follow church or Circle C Ranch policy about avoiding bodily contact with minors and the opposite sex. The policies were in place in the early 2000s, a period Aaron's former friend called "The Circle C Ten Commandments," and was mentioned by multiple camp staff members interviewed for this story.

In multiple letters and meetings over the past year, The Chapel pastors have implored the board of Circle C Ranch to hear and consider the women's allegations.

> "Patterns of predatory behavior emerged and grew more egregious as time passed.
>
> Christian Chambers, M.S. Ed., licensed mental health counselor

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"We believe they are telling the truth," The Chapel's lead pastor, Jerry Gillis, said in an interview with USA TODAY Network reporters.

In 2020, The Chapel hired Ministryhub, a consulting company supported by law firm Law & Sorrin that provides third-party investigations of abuse allegations in Christian ministries, to conduct an independent investigation into the claims.

The Ministryhub report given to local Child Protective Services in 2021 outlined that the company had found evidence of an ongoing pattern of manipulation and intimacy between Aaron and teenage girls.

"I found each of the women to be credible," said attorney and founder of Ministryhub Kimberlee Norris, who has practiced law addressing child sexual abuse for over 30 years. "Patterns of predatory behavior emerged and grew more egregious as time passed."

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> Christian Chambers, M.S. Ed., licensed mental health counselor

Aaron denied to the Ministryhub report, according to excerpts from Aaron's employee personnel file at The Chapel, and interviews with youth group members at The Chapel, Circle C staff and pastors in the western New York area.

Many of those women would later spend years in therapy to erase traces of emotional entanglement with him.

"He finds girls that he likes, and he gets them into a cohesively positive where they tell him everything," McDonald said. "He grooms them to the point where they have no boundaries anymore. Everything is just a grey area."

Linda A. Smith, 64, who worked at Circle C's business manager between 2004 and 2008, said she felt honored to be working at the Ranch when she was first hired.

"When I first came on, I was in awe of the Aarons," said Smith, referring to Wes Aaron Sr. and his wife, Margaret. "I sensed that I was a part of something very good. That this was what I had hoped for and thought that it was."

Within a year, however, she said she soured after she joined. Its report her unease about the habits she'd seen develop between Wayne Aaron and teenage girls at the camp. She'd resign from her position not long after, her emotions a mix of heartbreak and frustration as she left the Ranch.

"It dawns on you pretty quickly that this is not appropriate," Smith said.

She added that the difference between the strict rules for teenage camp staff members and the operational freedom that Aaron seemed to have as a senior leader was stark. "You start to see the dichotomy of how the kids are treated and how Wayne was untouchable as far as what he was allowed to do," she said.

The efforts of Aaron's actions have grown, spawning a black hole that consumed the women's lives, they said, and ripped apart personal relationships and church alliances in the close-knit Christian community in western New York.

Many people are devoted to the Ranch and the Aaron family, and said they never experienced or witnessed egregious physical behavior from Aaron.

"It would not square with what I know his character is. I can't make sense of it," said Rich Fetchen, 55, who worked with Aaron at both The Chapel and the Ranch for decades.

But during his tenure at Circle C, Fetchen admitted that he saw Aaron closely embrace girls, and that, on multiple occasions, he happened upon Aaron and a girl speaking together in secluded rooms or spaces.

Fetchen was sufficiently concerned, he said, that he confronted Aaron at the time about ending up alone in a space with someone of the opposite sex, which was prohibited under another one of the Ranch's policies.

In a May 3, 2021, email, Aaron said there were occasions, such as when problems arose at the Ranch, when he would have to "enter a space where a female counselor is present."

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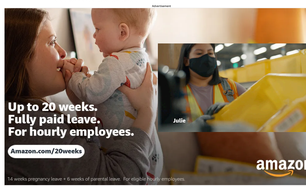


When asked if he had ever been confronted about his interactions with teen girls at camp by board members, ranch employees or volunteers, Aaron said no family member or Ranch board member had ever complained to him regarding his conduct.

Others have expressed suspicion, nonchalance or patent disbelief regarding women's stories on social media, or in person at church meetings.

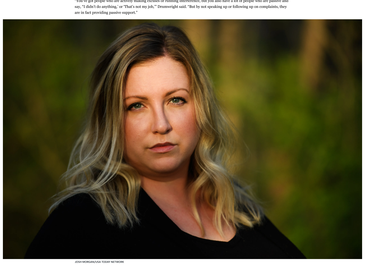
The USA TODAY Network asked for comment from five individuals who support the Ranch and the Aarons. None agreed to interview on the record for this story, and they did not provide additional sources who would be willing to comment on the record.

It can be difficult for people to see a well-known leader or authority figure as a potential perpetrator of abuse, said Rachael Denhollander, a lawyer and advocate for victims of sexual abuse who was the first victim to publicly accuse Larry Nassar, a former doctor for USA Gymnastics, of sexual abuse in 2016.

"We've been conditioned to think that abuse is the man in the trench coat in the bush," but often it's someone who would never be considered capable of that behavior, Denhollander said. Abusers may rely on that misconception to create an environment in which their abuse can continue in plain sight, she said.

Those environments are often helped by a network of allies, passive or complicit supporters or followers who don't report the perpetrator's actions, said Minette Drumwright, a professor and researcher at the University of Texas at Austin who has studied workplace harassment.

"You've got people who are actively making excuses or running interference, but you also have a lot of people who are passive and say, 'I didn't do anything,' or 'That's not my job,'" Drumwright said. "But by not speaking up or following up on complaints, they are in fact perpetrating passive support."



JOHN PARKINSON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Devon O'Dierno told the USA Today Network that Wayne Aaron was physically inappropriate with her, including placing his hands on her bottom while hugging her tightly in an empty room, while she was on staff at Circle C Ranch in the 2000s.

VANESSA PARTO

Investigating the claims

Since late 2019, allegations about Wayne Aaron's misconduct have gained momentum.

Carolyn McDonald was one of the first women to make the Circle C board aware of her abuse allegations, in the form of an email on Oct. 6, 2019.

That email launched a series of events, including at least two separate investigations into Aaron's conduct, and the involvement of law enforcement and state camp licensure officials.

Wayne Aaron temporarily stepped back from his role as the Ranch's president in January 2020, according to a Circle C statement on Jan. 18.

The organization's legal counsel at the time, Jaki Hilliker, investigated the initial abuse claims.

Hilliker's recommendations were that Aaron resign permanently and be replaced, and that the board be restructured to add more non-family members, according to Randy Fletcher, a board member at the time.

But the Ranch's board rejected Hilliker's findings, Fletcher said. He resigned from the board soon afterward, he said.

When reached by phone, Hilliker said she could not comment on what her recommendations were or whether they were accepted or rejected by the board. She is no longer representing Circle C Ranch.

The USA TODAY Network reached out to Wayne Aaron, his son Josh Aaron, and board members Daryl Dekalb and Wes Aaron Jr. for comment specific to this matter. All four did not respond.

Ronald Snell, a longtime friend of Wes Aaron Sr. and Circle C board member for a short period,could not be reached after repeated attempts.

Circle C Ranch would ultimately determine the initial allegations were false through its own internal investigation. Aaron and the Circle C board members did not respond when asked how this investigation was conducted and who conducted it.

At that point, Carolyn McDonald lovely considered a lawsuit, but dismissed it after her lawyers said it would be difficult to bring her most egregious allegations of abuse to court, because she couldn't remember whether she was 17 or 18 when they occurred.

The USA TODAY Network's requests for comment from McDonald's lawyers were not returned. Other women alleging abuse at Aaron's hands said they're not considering filing civil lawsuits at this time.

Pastors at The Chapel spent most of last year arranging or supporting meetings between Chapel staff, Aaron or Circle C board members, and the growing number of women alleging Aaron's abuse.

GEORGE SLOBODA/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Rachel Horvath alleges Wayne Aaron's physical and verbal behavior toward her was inappropriate and abusive while she was on staff at Circle C Ranch in 2011.

VANESSA PARTO

In a fall 2020 letter, Wayne Aaron said he was mistaken or convinced ★ and that Circle C's independent investigation was complete, and had found no factual basis ★ for the allegations against him at that point.

Around the same time, The Chapel hired MinistrySafe ★ to formally investigate claims of Aaron's abuse.

MinistrySafe's investigation quickly evolved to include allegations of Aaron's abuse at Circle C Ranch.

MinistrySafe lawyer Kimberlee Norris interviewed 21 women alleging abuse and 10 individuals offering additional corroborating information.

The investigation's findings were serious enough that Norris recommended Chapel staff share them with law enforcement ★, state and local Office of Children and Family Services agencies and state and local prosecutorial offices of Republican officials across Western New York.

Norris also contacted local law enforcement and local agencies herself about the findings, according to police reports.

In early 2021, The Chapel held a membership meeting ★ to share some of the findings and to announce the church was suspending all activities and financial ties to Circle C Ranch.

Circle C Ranch released its own investigation of the allegations at The Chapel on the ranch's website in March 2021. It detailed the ranch's denial of the allegations and called the data found by the MinistrySafe investigation "essentially meaningless."

The Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office opened an investigation into the case in early 2021, but the office, along with the Cattaraugus County District Attorney, ultimately determined none of the allegations were criminally actionable now, because the statute of limitations had expired, according to police reports.

'Wayne's girls'

They called them "Wayne's girls."

It was normal to pick them in the first few days of camp — they were pretty and thin teenagers, mainly staff but sometimes campers, said Nicole Richard, 40, of Norfolk, Virginia, who worked at the Ranch in the mid-2000s and said Aaron touched her inappropriately and made comments about her appearance.

These girls often had a mix of issues going on in their home lives and a desire to talk at length about their adolescent problems, according to McDonald and other former staff members at the ranch.

Joe Petrunio remembers coming upon a group of female counselors on one of his first days on staff at the ranch when he was 24. They were hanging on which new campers Wayne Aaron might pay special attention to, he said.

Petrunio, now 36, eventually became a full-time program director at the ranch, and said he repeatedly witnessed physically intimate moments between Aaron and teenage girls, sometimes in deserted or secluded areas. He left his position in 2011.

Petrunio would sometimes linger in these secluded locations, awkwardly making conversation, to ensure someone else was present.

"I would play this weird game of being bold and defending these girls, but doing it in a way that doesn't get you removed," he said. "If I got fired, who was going to stand in the gap?"

Photo from Wayne Aaron's Facebook page of Aaron and other women at a Christmas party. Many women accusing the country have alleged Wayne Aaron's physical and verbal behavior toward them at either The Chapel or Circle C Ranch was inappropriate and abusive. Pictured, from left, are Kathy Schlitz, Rachel Horvath, Jessica Spiesz, Carolyn McDonald, Joy McCullough and Michelle Salzarulo, April 3, 2021. From left are Kathy Schlitz, Rachel Horvath, Jessica Spiesz, Carolyn McDonald, Joy McCullough and Michelle Salzarulo.

GEORGE SLOBODA/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Those who didn't fit the type — boys and plain-looking or heavier set girls — were often ignored or brushed off, said Petrunio and McDonald, whom Petrunio said he often saw in one-on-one conversations with Aaron.

In 2009, Petrunio, now a program director at camp during the summers, spoke to Wayne Aaron's father, Wes Aaron Sr., about his concerns ★.

"He told me, 'My son has a problem, he's an idiot, and he's going to ruin this camp if he doesn't stop,'" Petrunio said. "He said, 'I need you to make sure Wayne isn't teaching girls or is alone with them.' In a sick way, I already felt like that was my responsibility."

Petrunio said he would speak to Wes Aaron Sr. about Wayne Aaron's habits right or wrong more times before leaving his position. Wes Aaron Sr. died in March 2020.

As women's stories have piled up over the last year, the devastating effects of Aaron's treatment of girls are crystal clear to Petrunio.

"Everything I've read so far, every story on Facebook, … I don't doubt it," he said. "I've seen those same patterns. It went unchecked. Even if the girls got chosen, there's a good chance that he's going to continue on spiritually manipulating people if none of the truth gets out there."

Claims reported over decades

In an interview with Buffalo's WKBW-TV in March, Wayne Aaron told reporters he'd like to know the identities of the women who are accusing him of impropriety.

But several of them made themselves known to Aaron or his board over the years in hopes that confronting the issue head-on would cause Aaron's behavior to change.

Jennifer Antone, now 40 and living in Salt Lake City, Utah, alleges she was inappropriately touched by Aaron on missions trips and at The Chapel in the mid-

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She reported him at the time to pastors at The Chapel, who eventually met with him at least four separate times between ages and eight reporting his physical habits with teenage girls, according to excerpts from Aaron's personnel file at The Chapel, provided by email to the USA TODAY Network by Chapel leadership.

JEFFREY SABOULA/USA TODAY NETWORK

Jennifer Adena alleges that Wayne Aarum touched her inappropriately, including pressing his groin into her back, while he was a youth pastor and she was a youth group member at The Chapel in the 1990s.
VANESSA TRUEBLOOD

There, in 2019, Ellie Campbell, a staff member and youth leader at The Chapel, went to current Lead Pastor Jerry Gillis about a concerning incident ▶ between a youth group member and Aarum.

Gillis said he brought the concern to his Chapel colleague Wes Aarum Jr., Wayne Aarum's brother, who said he'd handle it from there, Gillis said. Gillis didn't think to look at Wayne Aarum's personnel file at the time, he said.

"I wish I'd done more," Gillis said. "I was uncomfortable in retrospect looking back on this and wishing I would have done more. Hindsight is a ridiculously good teacher."

Aarum maintains that there were no complaints about his interactions with youth group students during his tenure at The Chapel or in the decade afterward, he said in an April 28 email.

In response, The Chapel's executive pastor, John Catsaros, said in a May 1 statement to reporters: "The Chapel has reviewed the personnel file and believes that the assertations made by Mr. Aarum are not consistent with the contents of the file."

Last year, Carolyn McDonald faced members of the Circle C Ranch board and shared her story directly ▶ for the first time. Wayne Aarum was not present for the meeting.

"It wasn't until this year that I saw (three moments) for the evil that they really are," McDonald said in a recording of the meeting, "All of these moments were in the cloud of deception that Wayne had transformed through a careful grooming process."

The meeting with the Circle C Board, bolstered by The Chapel, demonstrated the board's reference to acknowledge a pattern of troubling behavior from Aarum.

During the meeting, Wes Aarum Jr., a Circle C board member and Wayne Aarum's brother, called the allegations "horrific." Board members Daryl Dekalb expressed reservations about the process and said they couldn't truly respond without Wayne Aarum being present.

Dekalb declined to comment for this story. Wes Aarum Jr. did not return requests for comment.

The year since would be punctuated by tests to McDonald's claims — other women telling her they'd been abused, too. They formed friendships around their desperation to see Aarum's actions taken seriously by the ranch.

Meanwhile, Adenna, who alleged abuse from Aarum in the 1990s at The Chapel, confronted Aarum himself over a video call in early 2020.

"I told him that when #MeToo came out, he's the one I thought of," Adenna said. Aarum was neither defensive nor apologetic, she said.

"He played dumb," Adenna said. "He said, 'I loved you guys and viewed you as my own children. I never meant to make you feel uncomfortable.'"

Her determination to bring to light what she calls her "Wayne story" pushed her to confront Aarum, speak to investigators and police and contact other women who've been through similar experiences.

She's angry, but not vindictive. In the end, she doesn't control what happens to Aarum, she said.

"Forgiveness is the Lord's," Adenna said. "But I want justice."

Follow reporters Sarah Taddeo and Georgia Orlando on Twitter: @sjtaddeo& @OrlandoGA

Resources for victims of sexual abuse or domestic violence

Darkness to Light hotline

1-866-FOR-LIGHT (866-367-5444)

Sexual abuse prevention organization Darkness to Light operates a toll-free number for individuals, children or adults, in the U.S. who need local information and resources about sexual abuse.

Individuals can also text 'LIGHT' to 741741 for crisis support with a trained counselor, 24/7 and free of charge.

For more, visit the website at www.d2l.org.

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INVESTIGATIONS

Woman says she reported possible abuse at Circle C Ranch to police years ago

Sarah Taddeo and Georgia Orlando

A camp employee reported concerns about Wayne Aarum's behavior to police and the Department of Health 15 years ago. They never followed up with her.

Sarah Taddeo and Georgia Orlando New York State Times

Published 5:11 am CST Dec. 2, 2021 | Updated 9:24 pm CST Dec. 3, 2021

Linda A. Smith sat in her car outside the Arcade Police Department on an early August afternoon in 2016, strengthening her resolve before taking a step that she couldn't take back.

Having her cooking tenure as business manager at Circle C Ranch, a Christian children's camp in rural Cattaraugus County in Western New York, Smith, 62, had witnessed camp President Wayne Aarum touch multiple young female camp staff members inappropriately.

She'd seen him soft-fist upper thighs while sitting alone with them in a secluded corner of the conference room, or shuffle them into his office for counsel over things like foreign bumblebeds, parental problems or issues at camp. Other camp staffers said they noticed similar behavior from Aarum in the dorms and stores.

"I'd had enough," Smith said to herself, and marched into the police department in Wyoming County to report Aarum's behavior.

But they didn't let her make a report. A police clerk told her police needed the people affected — the girls themselves — to share their experiences directly, Smith said.

However, Arcade Police Chief Matthew Krist, a 34-year veteran with the village police force who became chief in early 2021, said victim accounts are not needed when officers create an initial contact report.

> **Share your story**
>
> If you've had experiences with Wayne Aarum that you believe to be abusive, please help us investigate. You can share anonymously or with your name.
>
> Email the team

Smith thought about trying to persuade some girls to give statements, but felt torn — she believed they knew what they'd experienced with Aarum was inappropriate, but that they "needed some distance" from the situation, she said.

She did speak to one girl who'd experienced a negative physical encounter with Aarum, but the girl didn't seem to want to be involved, Smith said.

By the end of August 2016, Smith resigned from her job and left Circle C. She estimates she saw Aarum alone with teenage girls between the ages 12 and 18 about 30 times that year.

"I tried to make myself stay as longer because I thought, I'm saving things here that I can document, but once everybody else left, I'm down in just working with the Aarums," Smith said. "What remains is that Wayne is doing this to those girls, and is going to do it again."

At the time, Smith said, she hoped that something would be done about it, she didn't alerted local authorities and talked to two other adult staff members at the Ranch.

Fifteen years later, Aarum, who is still the president of Circle C Ranch as of spring 2021, has been accused of inappropriate conduct toward more than six women over two decades, at the Ranch and at The Chapel, a Buffalo-area megachurch.

The Chapel at Crosspoint in Getzville, Erie County, Thursday, April 8, 2021.
GEORGE SCHNELLMAN | STAR NETWORK NEW YORK

People reported his alleged behavior to camp officials and church leaders over six times since 1997. Clergy are mandated reporters under state law.

Smith is the only confirmed person to have alerted state officials and law enforcement until this year. Those agencies did not investigate Smith's claims at the time, due to jurisdictional errors or failure to follow state reporting procedures.

Abuse reporting procedure at children's camps in New York is a patchwork process that could involve at least three different state and local agencies. This appeared to have contributed to a statewide lag in addressing Aarum's pattern of alleged misconduct with young women.

At least two law enforcement agencies — the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office and the Amherst (Erie County) Police Department — investigated the allegations in 2021.

What remains is that Wayne is doing this to these girls, and is going to do it again.

Linda A. Smith, former business manager at Circle C Ranch

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The Sheriff's Office investigation is currently closed because some of the allegations weren't criminal in nature, or the statute of limitations on specific alleged actions had expired, said Cattaraugus County Sgt. Drew Hillenan over the phone in May.

The Amherst Police Department's investigation was closed on May 14, 2021, because the statute of limitations had expired on allegations of Aarum's conduct at The Chapel as well, said public information officer Christopher Meyer via email.

Aarum has consistently denied the allegations, saying in a May 1, 2021, email to a USA TODAY NETWORK reporter that he had never touched anyone "in a way that was unsuitable or incorrect in the work, education, location, setting, or circumstances."

He acknowledged that he hugged and patted young people on the back in a youth group context, and that he may have "entered a bedroom with a young person when my presence" at camp, in response to allegations that he was routinely alone with young women in secluded spaces or empty rooms.

"I have never intentionally said or done anything to hurt anyone," Aarum said in an April 28 email to reporters.

'There's still time'

The police were Smith's last resort.

Several days before going to Arcade Police, she contacted Rebecca Johnstone, who conducted camp inspections as a sanitarian at the Cattaraugus County Health Department for more than 15 years. Johnstone has since retired from county service.

County health departments inspect and issue licenses for about 4,500 children's camps across New York state, according to the state Department of Health.

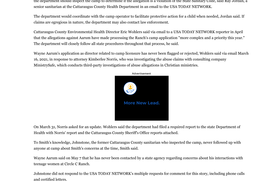
Health officials conduct camp inspections twice yearly, evaluating things like kitchen hygiene, book bed safety and screenings of camp staff for criminal convictions and flags in state sexual offense databases.

Smith hoped Johnstone could investigate Aarum's behavior while summer camp was still in session, or provide further guidance about what to do with her concerns.

"I thought, "There's still time for them to get up here and interview the girls, and find out what's going on," Smith said.

But Johnstone said the department couldn't make a report unless campers were being abused, Smith said. The majority of the girls Smith saw with Aarum were Ranch staff members.

Health department inspection reports for Circle C Ranch from years to scroll show Johnstone's signature, next to handwritten lists of minor violations she noted each year, such as pool deterioration or missing outlet covers.



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A 2016 Cattaraugus County Department of Health inspection report for Circle C Ranch shows Rebecca Johnstone's signature on the bottom, although she said she carried inspections for at least 15 years, according to documents obtained from the county under a freedom of information request.

There was no mention of sexual abuse allegations in these reports, obtained by the USA TODAY NETWORK through a Freedom of Information Law request.

If an allegation of child abuse — or abuse of someone off or under — comes to the health department from a camp staff member, the department should inspect the camp to determine if the allegation is a violation of the State Sanitary Code, said Ray Jordan, a senior sanitarian at the Cattaraugus County Health Department in an email to the USA TODAY NETWORK.

The department would coordinate with the camp operator to facilitate protective action for a child when needed, Jordan said. If claims are egregious in nature, the department may also contact law enforcement.

Cattaraugus County Environmental Health Director Eric Wohlers said via email to a USA TODAY NETWORK reporter in April that the allegations against Aarum have made processing the Ranch's camp application "more complex and a priority this year." The department will closely follow all state procedures throughout that process, he said.

Wayne Aarum's application as director related to camp licensure has never been flagged or rejected, Wohlers said via email March 16, 2021, in response to attorney Kimberlee Norris, who was investigating the abuse claims with consulting company Ministryfuel, which conducts third-party investigations of abuse allegations in Christian ministries.

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On March 31, Norris asked for an update. Wohlers said the department had filed a required report to the state Department of Health with Norris' report and the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office reports attached.

To Smith's knowledge, Johnstone, the former Cattaraugus County sanitarian who inspected the camp, never followed up with anyone at camp about Smith's concerns at the time, Smith said.

Wayne Aarum said on May 1 that he has never been contacted by a state agency regarding concerns about his interactions with teenage women at Circle C Ranch.

Johnstone did not respond to the USA TODAY NETWORK's multiple requests for comment for this story, including phone calls and certified letters.

After USA TODAY NETWORK reporters repeatedly asked Jordan, Wohlers and another health department official for comment on whether Johnstone knew about abuse allegations against Aarum in 2016, the Cattaraugus County attorney, Ashley Millman, told reporters the officials declined an interview.

When calling the health department didn't seem to go anywhere, Smith tried law enforcement.

But Arcade Police have no jurisdiction over the county where Circle C Ranch is located. Arcade officers should have immediately referred Smith to the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office, said Arcade Police Chief Matthew Krist.

He could not confirm the circumstances around Smith's original complaint, and no report exists of her visit to the department, Krist said.

"You want to make sure you take information that you feel is worthy of a follow-up and is credible," Krist said. "I can't believe that nobody would have done that."

Smith said Arcade Police never referred her to the Sheriff's Office or followed up with her to her concerns. Sheriff's Office reports regarding Aarum and Circle C Ranch don't reference any information from Smith or Arcade Police.

More than a decade later, the Sheriff's Office would be inundated with stories of women who said they were abused by Aarum at camp or at The Chapel over the past six years.

Smith called the Sheriff's Office in early 2021 to share her story, Cattaraugus County's Millman confirmed in May. That was the first he'd heard of her account.

'Whose job is it?'

A local health department may report abuse allegations to law enforcement or to a statewide child abuse hotline known as the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

The hotline is operated by the Office of Child and Family Services, which has no oversight of summer camps, said state OCFS spokesperson Monica Malafire.

The hotline only accepts reports of abuse of victims under 18, including children under immediate threat by parents or legal guardians. Once accepted, those reports would go to local Child Protective Services for further investigation, Malafire said.

The USA TODAY NETWORK asked for reports of calls to the hotline about Aarum or Circle C Ranch under the Freedom of Information Law. That request was denied because child abuse records, at state and county levels, are confidential.

There are no confirmed instances of camp staff or parents calling the hotline about Aarum's conduct.

Fast forward to early 2021: Ministryfuel is nearly finished with its investigation of Aarum's alleged behavior with women.

Ministryfuel attorney Kimberlee Norris, who has 30 years of experience in sexual abuse litigation, found the allegations against Aarum to be serious enough that the recommended Chapel pastors report her findings to police and the state as soon as possible.

She herself contacted the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office about the matter.

"If I was reportable then, it is reportable now," Norris said in an interview with the USA TODAY NETWORK reporters.

Norris also contacted Buffalo's regional Office of Children and Family Services division in January 2021 to crosscheck reports of findings. The regional office director, Amanda Darling, encouraged Norris via email on Jan. 11 to contact the state hotline with the information, which Norris did the same day.

On March 15, after receiving a copy of Norris' written report, Darling told Norris via email that the matter fell outside the jurisdiction of the state hotline and Child Protective Services, because the time period to which the events were alleged to have occurred was in the past; the impacted youth were now over 18 and Aarum is not legally responsible for them as a parent or guardian.

She added that because Norris' finding concerned a summer camp, the matter should be referred to the Department of Health.

Darling did not return requests for comment.

Video from 1997 worried actors who could have alleged Wayne Aarum's physical and emotional behavior toward children at camp. The Chapel at Crosspoint in Getzville, Erie County, Thursday, April 8, 2021. From left are Carolyn McDonald, Michelle Hoover, Rachel Horvath, Jessica Sydney, Ashley Schiller and Joy McCullough.
GEORGE SCHNELLMAN | NEW YORK STATE TIMES

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Meanwhile, the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office dug into Norris' report, interviewing 14 women in the early months of 2021, according to police reports.

Silieman, of the Sheriff's Office, and County District Attorney Lori Pettit Rieman eventually decided that none of the cases could be prosecuted criminally, according to the report.

"It was determined that in most of the cases . . . even if a crime had occurred, that statute of limitations on those crimes had expired," the report read.

On Feb. 5, the agency closed the case, the report noted, and on Feb. 9, Silieman reached out to the women in a mass email, saying their allegations were not criminally actionable.

Silieman confirmed in May that some of Aarum's alleged actions may have constituted a charge of endangering the welfare of a child or forcible touching, both misdemeanors, if the statute of limitations hadn't expired, according to the police report.

Under the Child Victims Act, individuals and attorneys alleging felony child abuse have seven years, starting at age 18, to file criminal charges.

When asked to explain whether the statute of limitations had indeed expired on some allegations, Silieman deferred to Pettit Rieman, who did not return the USA TODAY NETWORK's multiple requests for comment.

The women can also file civil child abuse cases until Aug. 14, 2021, under the Child Victims Act, as long as they are under 55 years old.

State and local agencies, some of which heard of abuse concerns involving Aarum in the mid-2000s, should have acted more urgently to investigate, said Mississippi's Norris. Pastors and others have tried to report what they've heard and seen, but their efforts fell flat if they didn't reach the correct person or agency at the right time.

"Here is 8 that various state agencies in the state in receipt of this information are not acting?" Norris said. "If it's not your job, whose job is it?"

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Advertisement

'He was my identity': How emotional, spiritual abuse creates lasting trauma

Abuse survivors describe how they were manipulated and groomed

Women alleging Wayne Aarum's abuse say they've experienced decades of emotional and spiritual damage as a result.

Sarah Tashlos and Georgia Rivards New York State Team
PUBLISHED 6:30 AM UTC Dec. 2, 2021 | Updated 6:04 pm UTC Dec. 10, 2021

For decades, Michelle Poulsen struggled to feel emotionally safe around men.

She had very few relationships in college, but kept them at an arm's length. Even after marrying a man she loved, she was horrified to break down the emotional walls she'd built to protect herself.

Now, as a 38-year-old mom, Poulsen can trace her fear of romantic attachment to moments as a teenager where she says those feelings were awakened and warped by her youth pastor, Wayne Aarum, who was ever twice her age.

She can still feel his kisses on her forehead, his hand on hers, huddled together in deserted church activity rooms in the mid-1990s. He told her loved her; he was a married man. He would shower similar affection on other girls while Poulsen watched, burning with jealousy for his attention.

"I had no idea, at such a young age, how it formated me," Poulsen said. "He was my identity."

Adults who foster emotional and physical relationships with teenagers — and use the connection to abuse and manipulate — can poison the child's ability to value themselves and recognize true love in relationships, said Pulsen's therapist, Cheryl Chambers, a licensed mental health counselor with Christian Counseling Ministries of Western New York.

> "The thing with emotional sexual abuse is it can have the same kind of damage to a girl's psyche as if they had been raped,"

Cheryl Chambers, licensed mental health counselor

"The thing with emotional sexual abuse is it can have the same kind of damage to a girl's psyche as if they had been raped," Chambers said. "It confuses them about the role of a man in their life ... and it strips them of their dignity in terms of who they are as women."

Sixteen women, including Poulsen, accuse Aarum of fostering emotionally and physically intimate relationships with them when they were teenagers, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Aarum, 72, founded The Chapel in Cattaraugus County, a church, in the 1970s, and served as current president of Circle C Ranch, a Christian children's camp in Cattaraugus County, a neighboring town.

They point to Aarum as being the source of years of inner anguish and emotional confusion, resulting in low self-esteem, eating disorders, distrust of romantic partners and an inability to connect spiritually with God.

In an emailed statement to USA TODAY NETWORK reporters on April 28, Aarum denied any wrongdoing in his interactions with teenage girls over the past two decades, saying that he has "never intentionally said or done anything to hurt anyone."

Aarum has so far not acknowledged that his behavior may have resulted in any lasting trauma for the women who have come forward.

'He hooked onto a vulnerability'

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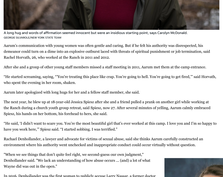
At 16, Carolyn McDonald had never been away from home for a whole summer. So unexpectedly becoming a counselor at Circle C Ranch in 2006, a 30-acre camp in rural Western New York, felt daunting to her.

Stressed about the responsibility, McDonald sat crying on the front porch of a building at the camp. Wayne Aarum spotted her and came over to console her.

At the time, his long hug and words of affirmation seemed innocent, she said. Looking back now, she sees that moment as an insidious starting point.

"I think that was the point where he hooked onto a vulnerability," McDonald said.



A long hug and words of affirmation seemed innocent but seen as insidious starting point, says Carolyn McDonald
STATES COUNTY NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Aarum's communication with young women was often gentle and caring. But if he felt his authority was disrespected, his demeanor changed, he would yell and sometimes throw things, with threats of spiritual punishment or job termination, said Rachel Horvath, 36, who worked at the Ranch in 2011 and 2012.

After she said a group of other young staff members missed a staff meeting in 2011, Aarum met them at the camp entrance.

"He started screaming, saying, "You're treating this place like crap. You're going to hell. You're going to get fired," said Horvath, who spent the evening in her room, shaken.

Aarum later apologized with long hugs for her and a fellow staff member, she said.

The next year, he blew up at 18-year-old Jessica Spiess after she and a friend pulled a prank on another girl while working at Circle C Ranch's dining hall, Horvath said. Spiess, now 27, offer several instances of yelling, Aarum calmly embraced Spiess, his hands on her bottom, his forehead to hers, she said.

"He said, 'I didn't want to scare you. You're the most beautiful girl that's ever worked at this camp. I love you and I'm so happy to have you work here," Spiess said. "I started sobbing. I was terrified."

Rachael Dentlebander, a lawyer and advocate for victims of sexual abuse, said she thinks Aarum carefully constructed an environment where his authority went unchecked and inappropriate conduct could occur virtually without question.

"When we see things that don't quite feel right, we second-guess our own judgment," Dentlebander said. "We lack an understanding of how abuse occurs ... [and] a lot of what Wayne did was out in the open."

Rachael Dentlebander
FRANKLIN

In 2016, Dentlebander was the first woman to publicly accuse Larry Nassar, a former doctor for USA Gymnastics, of sexual abuse.

Powerful individuals break down potential risks to their behavior by maintaining a "network of complicity" among employees and bystanders, said Minette Drumwright, a professor and researcher at the University of Texas at Austin. Drumwright published research in 2019 on how this phenomenon factors into workplace harassment.

In almost every instance of harassment she studied, the perpetrator was surrounded by people — family, close friends, employees or supporters — who actively or passively condoned, normalized or covered up his or her actions, making it easier to maintain a open pattern of bad behavior without raising red flags, she said.

"These perpetrators are very adept at building these networks inside and outside their organizations," Drumwright said. "They can activate them when they need to protect themselves."

Lasting emotional damage

When hidden or diminished, traumatic experiences can cut away at victims over time — and effects may not manifest for years later in life, said Cheryl Chambers, the mental health counselor.

Carolyn McDonald sought therapy as an adult for bulimia that emerged in her late teens, which she says was a direct result of Aarum's treatment of her. Jen McGillough, 38, another former staffer who alleges that Aarum fostered an inappropriate relationship with her as a teenager, developed disordered eating patterns through late high school and college.

Former Ranch staffer Devan O'Herron, 37 of Mooresville, North Carolina, said Aarum's treatment affected her relationships and her ability to separate herself from the pressure to please others.

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Other women accusing Aarum of abuse say they've faced similar issues that they trace back to their experiences with him, including depression, anxiety and difficulty trusting people.

"I've gone so long pretending it hadn't happened," said Amy Laskiewicz, 36, one of the women accusing Aarum of inappropriately touching her during a church youth group retreat at Circle C Ranch in the early 2010s.

For years, she buried feelings that her interactions with Aarum were wrong. It didn't seem serious, she said — his actions weren't overly sexual, and he often discussed prayer and the Bible while forming a bond with her.

And she had seen him do the same things with many other girls, she said.

"Now I'm looking at it again through older, wser mature, more wise eyes," Laskiewicz said. "There's a lot of anger, and there's hurt too. All of that time and emotion spent trying to get his attention. How many others has he done this to?"

The process of coming forward

Bites Carolyn McDonald came forward to The Chapel and Circle C Ranch with her allegations in late 2019, she became a lightning rod of sorts for more than a dozen other women who said they too experienced Wayne Aarum's emotional manipulation and physical advances.

She gets all the calls, all the texts, all the social media messages — all pleas from women who feel they need to share their stories.

And she is leading their charge to compel those in authority to hear their grievances and take action, despite public contempt and suspicion of their accounts from some Circle C Ranch staff and supporters.

"My goal is just for everyone to know what he's capable of," McDonald said. "I want people to know and be warned so that they can make informed decisions whether or not they want to send their daughters to him."

> "I want people to know and be warned so that they can make informed decisions whether or not they want to send their daughters to him."

Carolyn McDonald

For many of the women accusing Aarum of inappropriate behavior, the shame of that time in their lives still weighs heavily. It's painful for some, having wanted the attention as a young woman or having allowed Aarum to touch them in ways they didn't understand, and never telling anyone what happened to them.

They question whether they could have saved others if they'd only seen the behavior differently.

"I'm angry that when I came forward, I was so short-sighted and only thinking about myself," said Jennifer Adema, 40, who said she experienced years of unwanted physical contact from Aarum in the 1990s. She reported the behavior in 1997 while working with him at The Chapel, and Aarum left her alone after that, she said.

In February 2020, Adema confronted Aarum on a video call that was set up through The Chapel's leadership. In that call, Aarum denied knowing he acted inappropriately, and did not apologize for the behavior or make any admission of guilt, Adema said.

The trauma brought on by Aarum's abuse has clouded every relationship in her life, she said. After originally asking to speak off the record, Adema changed her mind.

She's tired of Aarum controlling the narrative, she said. She wants people to hear her story.

"This is not Wayne's first rodeo. ... Why do people have such a hard time believing it, when it's such an obvious pattern of devious behavior?" she said. "She has been going on for years. What are we doing?"

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These women say a Western NY pastor, Christian camp president abused them as teenagers

Abuse survivors describe how they were manipulated and groomed

More than 16 women across the U.S. allege Wayne Aarum's physical and emotional behavior toward them at The Chapel or Circle C Ranch was inappropriate.

Sarah Tashlos and Georgia Rivards New York State Team
PUBLISHED 6:30 AM UTC Dec. 2, 2021 | Updated 6:04 pm UTC Dec. 10, 2021

Wayne Aarum was the first man they McGillough ever held hands with.

It was 1997, and Aarum was her youth pastor. She was 13, and he told her she was amazing.

Nineteen years later, in 2016, at a Christian children's camp in Western New York, 16-year-old Laura Snell straddled a bench having Aarum, who was now the camp's president. They were seated off to the side in the dining hall, while a few other people milled around. He suggested they pray.

He ran his hands over her shoulders and up her thigh, leaned her crotch, and slid his fingers against her outer labia. Snell felt confused, she recalls, no one had ever touched her like that.

"I honestly didn't even know what was happening to me," said Snell, now 21. "He was definitely grooming me ... I didn't realize how absolutely brainwashing it was."

Laura Snell, 27, told the USA Today Network that Wayne Aarum inappropriately touched her, including running his hand over her crotch and fondling her while sitting in a dining hall, while Snell was an staff at Circle C Ranch in the mid-2010s.
MARK CUNNINGHAM | FOR USA TODAY NETWORK

A USA TODAY NETWORK investigation found that Aarum, 72, touched at least 16 teenage girls inappropriately, some on multiple occasions, according to their firsthand accounts.

He rules as youth pastor at Buffalo area church The Chapel in the 1970s and then as president at Circle C Ranch in rural Cattaraugus County around him is close proximity to dozens of girls — particularly youth group members from area

churches, and camp staff members.

That series, and Aaron's presence as an authority figure in a Christian setting, helped foster the girls' spiritual and emotional dependence on him, clearing the way for further manipulation and inappropriate behavior, said Cheryl Chambers, a licensed mental health counselor with Christian Counseling Ministries of Western New York.

The Chapel, Circle C Ranch
GEORGE SCANGAS, THE NY, NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

Fourteen women across the U.S. shared their stories on the record for this report, two others declined to share their names publicly but said they experienced similar conduct. Nineteen others — 14 of them speaking on the record, including former camp staff members, their family members and pastors in the region — said they personally witnessed Aaron's actions, or heard about them from staff or loved ones.

Leadership at both The Chapel and Circle C Ranch, and also Aaron himself, have been confronted with concerns about his conduct at least six times since taper, according to excerpts from Aaron's employee personnel file at The Chapel, and interviews with youth group members at The Chapel, Circle C staff and pastors in the Western New York area.

Several of these individuals specifically said Aaron did not follow a widely known Circle C Ranch policy about avoiding bodily contact between members of the opposite sex. This policy was included in a story document from a camp event titled "The Circle C Ten Commandments," and was mentioned by multiple camp staff members interviewed for this story.

In multiple letters and meetings over the past year, The Chapel pastors have implored the board of Circle C Ranch to hear and consider the women's allegations.

> **Patterns of predatory behavior emerged and grew more egregious as time passed.**
> GEORGE SCANGAS, THE NY, NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

Previous Next

"We believe they are telling the truth," The Chapel's lead pastor, Jerry Gillis, said at an interview with USA TODAY NETWORK reporters.

In 2020, The Chapel hired Ministryfish, a consulting company specialized by Sue Erm Law & Storks that provides third-party investigations of abuse allegations in Christian ministries, to conduct an independent investigation into the claims.

The Ministryfish report given to local Child Protective Services in 2021 outlined that the company had found evidence of an ongoing pattern of manipulation and intimacy between Aaron and teenage girls.

"I found each of the women to be credible," said attorney and founder of Ministryfish Kimberlee Norris, who has practiced law addressing child sexual abuse for over 30 years. "Patterns of predatory behavior emerged and grew more egregious as time passed."

Several authorities, including local police and the Cattaraugus County Department of Health, have received reports about Aaron. Two law enforcement agencies conducted investigations in the allegations earlier this year.

Despite these efforts to raise the alarm about Aaron's behavior, he remains in his position as president at Circle C Ranch as of spring 2021, a role in which he has spent considerable time with adolescent staff members.

He has consistently denied all claims against him of inappropriate conduct. In an email to a USA TODAY NETWORK reporter on April 28, 2021, Aaron said:

"I have never had any sexual interaction with anyone other than my wife. I have never touched anyone with any inappropriate motive."

He said in a May 7 email that he followed Ranch policies, except in emergency cases in which men and women may have to have physical contact.

Aaron declined to do a phone, Zoom or in-person interview.

Circle C Ranch published multiple statements on its website in recent months, doubling down on the argument that Aaron has never acted inappropriately with teenage girls in any pastoral role.

'I was so young': Former Circle C Ranch staffer discusses effects of abuse (4:48)

Carolyn McDonald, a former Circle C Ranch staffer, and Jerry Gillis, lead pastor at The Chapel, discuss the allegations against Wayne Aaron.
GEORGE SCANGAS, NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

The Wayne effect

Carolyn McDonald recalls the late winter night in 2007 when, she says, Aaron pinned her 17-year-old body to a church pew inside the Circle C Ranch camp's center chapel.

Aaron's breath was hot, his mouth inches from hers. McDonald, a teenage camp staff member who was at the Ranch working a winter church retreat, edited through a confession Aaron had been prying out of her — a story of watching porn when she was 13.

He demanded details and full-on contact. When she finished telling him about it, Aaron pinned her. he said God still loved her.

"I walked away from it feeling amazing — feeling like he'd done something monumental," said McDonald, who is now 31.

GEORGE SCANGAS,NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

Carolyn McDonald alleges Wayne Aaron physically and emotionally abused her, including touching her crotch over her clothes and barging into her bedchoice while she was in her underwear, while she was on staff at Circle C Ranch from 2006 to 2008.
GEORGE SCANGAS

For decades, youths across the region were enamored with Wayne Aarron, who operated in some of the highest-profile spaces in Western New York's Christian ecosystem.

Circle C Ranch, founded by Aaron's father, Wes Aaron Sr., in 1968 and still operated by the Aaron family, welcomes thousands of children every summer and hosts church youth retreats year-round. Nineteen million people visited the Circle C Ranch at Aaron's bring-integral to their personal spiritual growth and the formation of lasting connections within the area Christian community.

The Chapel, where Aaron's brother Wes Aaron Jr. was a pastor until he resigned in early 2021, is attended by about 3,000 people.

Former camp staffers and youth group members say Wayne Aarron had a reputation for being both the cool guy and the sensitive, serious type; some had a deep aversion to him.

He was friendly and charismatic in public, and his 6-foot-4-inch frame contrasted with his deferential sermons about sin and salvation. His face, with bright eyes, a salt-and-pepper goatee and weathered smile lines, could easily blend in with those of other Hasbro dads.

In skits at church and later at Circle C, he played Jesus.

Women who allege inappropriate interactions with Wayne Aaron as teenagers, many of whom did not know each other then, gave nearly identical accounts of his common phrases and actions toward them.

He would frequently sit alone with girls, his hand on their thighs, former camp staffers said.

Several women, including McDonald and Ashley Schiller, 37, of Grand Island, repeatedly remember him touching their crotches or inner thighs over their clothes while sitting in semi-public areas.

Ashley Schiller, 37, alleges Wayne Aaron's physical and verbal behavior toward her, including coming into her cabin while she was changing and touching her inappropriately. Schiller, a former camper and staff member at Circle C Ranch from the late 1990s.
GEORGE SCANGAS,NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

He would hug them from behind or from the side with his fingertips resting on the side of their breasts, female camp staffers said — multiple photos of Aaron with girls on social media show him touching them in this way.

He would kiss their foreheads, and he pin foreheads to theirs in a close embrace — a particular physical encounter that staff members at the Ranch would refer to as "getting Wayne'd."

Aaron said in a May 7 email that he had never touched anyone "in a way that was unsuitable or incorrect in the work, situation, location, setting, or circumstances."

He acknowledged in an April 28, 2021, email that he had "hugged (youth group members) in greeting or congratulating them," and "patted people on the back in acknowledgment of their accomplishments." Both actions were in socially appropriate contexts in the camps, he said.

"I have never intentionally said or done anything to hurt anyone," Aaron said.

He also formed deep emotional bonds with these girls, acting as a father figure and maintaining a constant stream of intimacy and attention, they said. The women obeying, above. Yet it sab how their relationships with family or boyfriends were going, and what he could do to help.

"It's so much more damaging than you could realize, especially at such a young age," said Michelle Poulsen, 38, who alleges Aaron initiated physically and emotionally intimate moments with her when she was a teenage youth group member at The Chapel.

"It was almost like I needed that from him," said Poulsen, who now lives in Amherst. "He validated my life."

GEORGE SCANGAS,NEW YORK CITY, TODAY

Michelle Poulsen and Joy McCullough allege Wayne Aaron's physical and verbal behavior toward them was inappropriate and abusive while they were youth group members at The Chapel in the late 1990s.
GEORGE SCANGAS

In a April 28 email to the USA TODAY NETWORK, Wayne Aaron acknowledged that his conversations with youth group members at The Chapel, meant to help them navigate their adolescent struggles, could have "sometimes lost (focus) because of the listener's personal situation," he said. "I have always tried to do my best to help."

Many of those women would later spend years in therapy to erase years of emotional entanglement with him.

"He finds girls that he likes, and he gets them into a vulnerable position where they tell him everything," McDonald said. "He grooms them to the point where they have no boundaries anymore. Everything is just a gray area."

Linda A. Smith, 65, of Holland, Erie County, who worked as Circle C's business manager between 2003 and 2008, said she felt honored to be working at the Ranch when she was first hired.

"When I first came on, I was in awe of the Aarons," said Smith, referring to Wes Aaron Sr. and his wife, Margaret. "I sensed that I was a part of something very special. That this was what I had hoped for and thought that it was."

Within a year, however, she said she would go to the police ▶ to report her unease about the habits she'd seen develop between Wayne Aaron and teenage girls at the camp. She'd resign from her position not long after, her emotions a mix of heartbreak and frustration as she left the Ranch.

"It dawns on you pretty quickly that this is not appropriate," Smith said.

She added that the difference between the strict rules for teenage camp staff members and the operational freedom that Aaron seemed to have as a senior leader was stark. "You start to see the dichotomy of how the kids are treated and how Wayne was untouchable as far as what he was allowed to do," she said.

The efforts of Aaron's actions have grown, spawning a black hole that consumed the women's lives, they said, and ripped apart personal relationships and church alliances in the close-knit Christian community in Western New York.

> **Share your story**
> If you've had experiences with Wayne Aaron that you believe to be abusive, please help us investigate. You can share anonymously or with your name.
> Email the Tip Line

Many people are devoted to the Ranch and the Aaron family, and said they never experienced or witnessed egregious physical behavior from Aaron.

"It would not square with what I know his character is. I can't make sense of it," said Rick Fetchen, 50, who worked with Aaron at both The Chapel and the Ranch for decades.

But during his tenure at Circle C, Fetchen admitted that he saw Aaron closely embrace girls, and that, on multiple occasions, he happened upon Aaron and a girl speaking together in secluded rooms or spaces.

Fetchen was sufficiently concerned, he said, that he confronted Aaron at the time about ending up alone in a space with someone of the opposite sex, which was prohibited under another one of the Ranch's policies.

In a May 7, 2021, email, Aaron said there were occasions, such as when problems arose at the Ranch, when he would have to "enter a space where a female counselor is present."

When asked if he had ever been confronted about his interactions with teen girls at camp by board members, Ranch employees or volunteers, Aaron said no family member or Ranch board member had ever complained to him regarding his conduct.

Others have expressed suspicion, nonchalance or paired disbelief regarding women's stories on social media, or in person at church meetings.

The USA TODAY NETWORK asked for comment from five individuals who support the Ranch and the Aarons. None agreed to interviews on the record. for this story, and they did not provide additional sources who would be willing to comment on the issues.

It can be difficult for people to see a well-known leader or authority figure as a potential perpetrator of abuse, said Rachael Denhollander, a lawyer and advocate for victims of sexual abuse who was the first victim to publicly accuse Larry Nassar, a former doctor for USA Gymnastics, of sexual abuse in 2016.

"We've been conditioned to think that abuse is the man in the trench coat in the bush," but often it's someone who would never be considered capable of that behavior, Denhollander said. Abusers may rely on that societal perception to create an environment in which their abuse can continue in plain sight, she said.

These environments are often helped by a network of oblivious, passive or complicit supporters or followers who don't report the perpetrator's actions, said Minette Drumwright, a professor and researcher at the University of Texas at Austin who has studied workplace harassment.

"You've got people who are actively making excuses or running interference, but you also have a lot of people who are passive and say, "I didn't do anything," or "That's not my job," Drumwright said. "But by not speaking up or following up on complaints, they are in fact perpetrating passive support."

JOSH MCDANIELSON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Devan O'Dierno told the USA Today Network that Wayne Aarum was physically inappropriate with her, including placing his hands on her bottom while hugging her tightly in an empty room, while she was on staff at Circle C Ranch in the 2000s.
YAMIROT PEREZ

Investigating the claims

Since late 2019, allegations about Wayne Aarum's misconduct have gained momentum.

Carolyn McDonald was one of the first women to make the Circle C board aware of her abuse allegations, in the form of an email on Oct. 8, 2019.

That email launched a series of events, including at least two separate investigations into Aarum's conduct, and the involvement of law enforcement and state using licensure officials.

Wayne Aarum temporarily stepped back from his role ✦ as the Ranch's president in January 2020, according to a Circle C statement on Jan. 28.

The organization's legal counsel at the time, Julia Hilliker, a partner at major Western New York law firm Hodgson Russ LLP, investigated the initial abuse claims.

According to Randy Fancher, a board member at the time, Hilliker's recommendations, relayed via a meeting with board members and later in a thread of emails to board members, were that Aarum resign permanently and be replaced, and that the board be restructured to add more non-family members.

But the Ranch's board rejected Hilliker's findings, Fancher said. He resigned from the board soon afterward, he said.

When reached by phone, Hilliker said she could not comment on what her recommendations were or whether they were accepted or rejected by the board. She is no longer representing Circle C Ranch.

The USA TODAY NETWORK reached out to Wayne Aarum, his son Josh Aarum, and board members Daryl Delabah and Wes Aarum Jr. for comment specific to this matter. All four did not respond.

Reporters also tried to contact Ronald Snell, a longtime friend of Wes Aarum Sr. and Circle C board member for a short period, who was also present at the meeting. Snell could not be reached after repeated attempts, including a letter to his home, phone calls and an email to his wife.

Circle C Ranch would ultimately determine the initial allegations were false through its own internal investigation. Aarum and the Circle C board members did not respond when asked how this investigation was conducted and who conducted it.

In that point, Carolyn McDonald briefly considered a lawsuit, but dropped it after her lawyers said it would be difficult to bring her most egregious allegations of abuse to court, because she couldn't remember whether the incident was when she was 17 or 18 when they occurred.

The USA TODAY NETWORK's requests for comment from McDonald's lawyers were not returned. Other women alleging abuse at Aarum's hands said they're not considering filing civil lawsuits at this time.

Pastors at The Chapel spent most of last year arranging or supporting meetings between Chapel staff, Aarum or Circle C Board members, and the growing number of women alleging Aarum's abuse.

Rachel Horvath, an ex-Buffalo, photographed in Buffalo on April 9, 2021, was a camp counselor at Circle C Ranch in 2001. Horvath alleges Wayne Aarum's physical and verbal behavior toward her then was inappropriate and abusive.

GEORGE SCHNEIDER/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Rachel Horvath alleges Wayne Aarum's physical and verbal behavior toward her was inappropriate and abusive while she was on staff at Circle C Ranch in 2001.
GEORGE SCHNEIDER

In a fall 2020 letter, Wayne Aarum said he was reinstated as president ✦ and that Circle C's independent investigation was complete, and had found no factual basis ✦ for the allegations against him at that point.

Around the same time, The Chapel hired Ministryhub ✦ to formally investigate Circle C's abuse claims.

Ministryhub's investigation, separate from Circle C's independent investigation, first focused on allegations of abuse at The Chapel youth group in the 1990s. It quickly evolved to include allegations of Aarum's abuse at Circle C Ranch, all of which were ultimately included in the investigation's findings.

Ministryhub lawyer Kimberlee Norris spent months interviewing dozens of victims, witnesses and corroborating sources. Of those, 21 women alleging abuse and 37 individuals offering additional corroborating information agreed to have their accounts reflected in the final report.

The investigation's findings were serious enough that Norris recommended Chapel staff to share them with law enforcement ✦, state child safety officials and Family Services agencies and state and local Department of Health agencies before her report was completed, she said.

Norris also contacted local law enforcement and local agencies herself about the findings, according to police reports.

Do you know someone connected to The Chapel or Circle C Ranch? Share this story

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In early 2021, The Chapel held a members-only meeting ✦ to share some of the findings and to announce the church was suspending all activities and financial ties to Circle C Ranch.

Circle C Ranch released its own investigation of the allegations at The Chapel on the Ranch's website in March 2021. It detailed the Ranch's denial of the allegations and called the data found by the Ministryhub investigation "essentially meaningless."

The Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office opened an investigation into this case in early 2021 after Norris contacted them regarding the allegations, according to police reports.

In the weeks following, over a dozen women gave statements to officers regarding their experiences with Aarum.

Police and the Cattaraugus County district attorney, Lori Pettit Kiernan, ultimately determined that none of the allegations, some of which could have been considered criminal in nature at the time, were criminally actionable now, because the statute of limitations had expired, according to police reports.

Cattaraugus County Sgt. Drew Silleman relayed this news via email on Feb. 9, 2021, to a group of women who gave statements to the agency.

Silleman confirmed in May that the Sheriff's Office investigation is closed. Pettit Kiernan has not responded to the USA TODAY NETWORK's multiple requests for comment.

The USA TODAY Network attempted to obtain any relevant reports filed on Wayne Aarum from the Office of Children and Family Services under the Freedom of Information Law. The request was denied because both state and county child abuse reports are confidential.

'Wayne's girls'

They called them "Wayne's girls."

It was normal to pick them in the first few days of camp — they were pretty and thin teenagers, mainly staff but sometimes campers, said Nicole Richard, 50, of Norfolk, Virginia, who worked at the Ranch in the mid-2000s and said Aarum touched her inappropriately and made comments about her appearance.

These girls often had a mix of issues going on in their home lives and a desire to talk at length about their adolescent problems, according to McDonald and other former Ranch staff members.

Joe Ferrante remembers coming upon a group of female counselors on one of his first days on staff at the Ranch when he was 15. They were hanging on which now campers Wayne Aarum might pay special attention to, he said.

Ferrante, now 36 and living in Rush, Monroe County, eventually became a full-time program director at the Ranch, and said he repeatedly witnessed physically intimate moments between Aarum and teenage girls, sometimes in deserted or secluded areas. He left his position at the Ranch in 2011.

Ferrante would sometimes linger in those secluded locations, awkwardly making conversation, to ensure someone else was present.

"I would play this weird game of being bold and defending these girls, but doing it in a way that doesn't get you removed," he said. "If I got fired, who was going to stand in the gap?"

More than 70 women across the country have alleged Wayne Aarum's physical and verbal behavior toward them at either The Chapel or Circle C Ranch from the late 1990s onward was inappropriate and abusive. Six of them were photographed together in Buffalo on April 9, 2021. From left, Jennifer Adema, Rachel Horvath, Jessica Spears, Carolyn McDonald, Joy McCullough and Michelle Poulson.
GEORGE SCHNEIDER/NEW YORK STATE TODAY

Those who didn't fit the type — born and plans looking out for girls — were then spurned or brushed off, said Ferrante and McDonald, whom Ferrante said he often saw in one-on-one conversations with Aarum.

In 2004, Ferrante, now a program director at camp during the summers, spoke to Wayne Aarum's father, Wes Aarum Sr., about his concerns. ✦

"He told me, 'My son has a problem, he's an idiot, and he's going to ruin this camp if he doesn't stop,'" Ferrante said. "He said, 'I need you to make sure Wayne isn't touching girls or is alone with them.' In a sick way, I already felt like that was my responsibility."

Ferrante said he would speak to Wes Aarum Sr. about Wayne Aarum's habits eight or nine more times before leaving his position at Circle C. Wes Aarum Sr. died in March 2020.

As women's stories have piled up over the last year, the devastating effects of Aarum's treatment of girls are crystal clear to Ferrante.

"Everything I've read so far, every story on Facebook ... I don't doubt it," he said. "I've seen these same patterns. It went unchecked. Even if the girls get closure, there's a good chance that he's going to continue on spiritually manipulating people if none of the truth gets out there."

Claims reported over decades

In an interview with Buffalo's WKBW-TV in March, Wayne Aarum told reporters he'd like to know the identities of the women who are accusing him of impropriety.

But several of them made themselves known to Aarum or his board over the years in hopes that confronting the issue head-on would cause Aarum's behavior to change.

Jennifer Adema, now 40 and living in Salt Lake City, Utah, alleges she was inappropriately touched by Aarum on missions trips and at The Chapel in the 1990s.

She reported him at the time to pastors at The Chapel, who eventually met with him at least four separate times between 1997 and 1998 regarding his physical habits with teenage girls, according to excerpts from Aarum's personnel file at The Chapel, provided by email to the USA TODAY NETWORK by Chapel leadership.

JEFFREY SWINGER FOR THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Jennifer Adema alleges that Wayne Aarum touched her inappropriately, including pressing his groin into her back, while he was a youth pastor and she was a youth group member at The Chapel in the 1990s.

Then, in 2012, Elle Campbell, a staff member and youth leader at The Chapel, went to current Lead Pastor Jerry Gillis about a concerning incident ✦ between a youth group member and Aarum at Camp Cazy.

Gillis said he brought the concern to his Chapel colleague Wes Aarum Jr., Wayne Aarum's brother, who said he'd handle it from there. Gillis said. Gillis didn't think to look at Wayne Aarum's personnel file at the time, he said.

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"I wish I'd done more," Gillis said. "I was uncomfortable in retrospect looking back on this and sticking I would have done more. Hindsight is a ridiculously good teacher."

Aarum maintains that there were no complaints about his interactions with youth group students during his tenure at The Chapel or in the decade afterward, he said in an April 28 email.

In response, The Chapel's executive pastor, John Camardo, said in a May 1 statement to reporters: "The Chapel has reviewed the personnel file and believes that the assertations made by Mr. Aarum are not consistent with the contents of the file."

Last year, Carolyn McDonald faced members of the Circle C Ranch board and shared her story directly ✦ for the first time. Wayne Aarum was not present for the meeting.

She explained how it took months of therapy to realize that her interactions with Aarum didn't happen because he loved her like a father.

"It wasn't until this year that I saw (those moments) for the evil that they really are," McDonald said in a recording of the meeting. "All of those memories were in the cloud of deception that Wayne had manufactured through a careful grooming process."

The meeting with the Circle C board, brokered by The Chapel, demonstrated the board's reference to acknowledge a pattern of troubling behavior from Aarum.

During the meeting, Wes Aarum Jr., a Circle C board member and Wayne Aarum's brother, called the allegations "horrific." Fellow board member Daryl Delabah expressed conversations about the process and said they couldn't truly respond without Wayne Aarum being present.

Delabah declined to comment generally for this story. Wes Aarum Jr. did not return requests for comment.

Jon Schoeberle, executive pastor at Cornerstone Church in Grand Island ✦ Carolyn McDonald's childhood church — was present, and pushed the board members to take action.

"We send our kids to camp and something happens, and we know about something, that's where it gets scary. We're talking about the Kingdom of God, aren't you afraid? I'm terrified of God," Schoeberle said in the meeting recording.

Jon Schoeberle, executive pastor at Cornerstone Church in Grand Island, New Cruzan.

Jon Schuerholz, executive pastor at Cornerstone Church in Grand Island, Erie County.
GEORGIE SILVAROLE/USA TODAY NETWORK NEW YORK

The year since would be punctuated by texts to McDonald's phone — other women telling her they'd been abused, too. They formed friendships around their desperation to see their stories taken seriously by leaders at the Ranch.

Meanwhile, Adema, who alleged abuse from Aarum in the 1990s at The Chapel, confronted Aarum himself over a video call in early 2020.

"I told him that when #MeToo came out, he's the one I thought of," Adema said. Aarum was neither defensive nor apologetic, she said.

"He played dumb," Adema said. "He said, 'I loved you guys and viewed you as my own children. I never meant to make you feel uncomfortable.'"

Her determination to bring to light what she calls her "Wayne story" propelled her through the events of the last year — confronting Aarum, speaking to investigators and police and comforting other women who've been through similar experiences.

She's angry, but not vindictive. In the end, she doesn't control what happens to Aarum, she said.

"Vengeance is the Lord's," Adema said. "But I want justice."

Are you a victim of sexual abuse or domestic violence?

There are organizations and resources to help you. if you live in New York or across the U.S., the following centers and hotlines can connect you with counseling, information and support:

Bivona Child Advocacy Center

585-935-7800 or info@bivonacac.org

Bivona Child Advocacy Center in Rochester, New York works on child abuse response, healing and prevention with a model that leverages collaboration between law enforcement, medical personnel, and child protective services.

Child Advocacy Center at BestSelf

716-887-5437 or cacinfo@bestselfwny.org

The CAC at BestSelf in Buffalo, New York brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals to address child sexual abuse in a child-centered environment.

New York State Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline

1-800-942-6906

Survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence in New York state can get connected with counseling, legal assistance and crisis help.

Darkness to Light hotline

1-866-FOR-LIGHT (866-367-5444)

Sexual abuse prevention organization Darkness to Light operates a toll-free number for individuals, children or adults, in the U.S. who need local information and resources about sexual abuse.

Individuals can also text 'LIGHT' to 741741 for crisis support with a trained counselor, 24/7 and free of charge.

For more, visit the website at www.d2l.org.

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Georgie Silvarole, backpack reporter with USA Today Network New York, left, and Sarah Taddeo, enterprise reporter with USA Today Network New York, right, in Rochester.
SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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