

Surviving Hillcrest

Letta Cartlidge created a group for missionary kids who'd attended her boarding school in Jos, Nigeria. The stories of abuse poured in.

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue



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It was on a Friday in spring 2021 that Letta Cartlidge decided she had seen enough.

In her backyard in a suburb of Denver, Colorado, a stack of bangles on her arm and an oversized cardigan draped around her shoulders, Cartlidge explained to the *Century* how on April 15, 2021, James McDowell, a former principal at [Hillcrest](#)—a boarding school primarily for the children of missionaries in Jos, Nigeria—admitted in a private Facebook group for Hillcrest alumni that he had “molested” two students during his tenure.

In his post, McDowell, who was at Hillcrest from 1974 to 1984, said he’d already apologized to the two students and offered restitution. But he also wanted to

apologize to the wider Hillcrest community for “this breach of trust which these days is considered criminal.”

As Cartlidge, a 1992 graduate of Hillcrest, watched reactions to McDowell’s post pour in, she estimated that about 30 percent of the people who commented were either angry or used it as an opportunity to share their own stories of abuse by other Hillcrest staff. The other 70 percent called McDowell brave for coming forward and assured him of God’s grace.

It was when the 70 percent began verbally attacking the 30 percent that Cartlidge knew she had to do something. The next day, she created a new Facebook group—[Hillcrest Survivors](#)—where people who’d had a negative experience at the school, herself among them, could speak freely and begin to process what had happened to them.

By fall 2022, Cartlidge’s Facebook group had 236 members. Perhaps more significantly, it had launched a nine-member steering committee that has started lobbying Hillcrest leadership for a professional, independent investigation of several decades worth of sexual, physical, and religious abuse allegations.

An independent investigation is key, said Rich Darr, cofounder of [Missionary Kids Safety Net](#), because missionaries are particularly susceptible to a worldview in which literally nothing is more important than winning souls to Christ. According to the theology many of them adopt, Jesus can only save the people who believe in him the exact way they do.

“And the kicker is, Jesus is coming back at any moment,” Darr said— “to take those who are saved to heaven, and everybody else is going to burn in hell.”

Once missionaries subscribe to this theology, Darr continued, they will ignore any number of red flags and create any number of cover-ups in order to protect the mission’s work. Because it’s not only of the utmost importance, it’s also urgent.

Since 1999, Missionary Kids Safety Net has worked with more than 1,000 children who were abused in 20 different boarding schools around the world. Darr, a retired United Methodist elder with a doctorate in theology, said that when abuse survivors confront boarding schools, they are almost always told to forgive and forget—because any negative publicity will damage the mission and the name of Christ.

“And we come back and say, ‘Hell no. That’s bad theology. You need to follow your own scriptural mandates of telling the truth and providing justice so that healing can take place.’”

Darr believes there’s a biblically based process of confession, repentance, and restitution that boarding schools must undergo when students come to them with abuse allegations. Only when the truth has been publicly confessed, the perpetrator held accountable, and some restitution has been made to the survivors can healing take place, he said. “The truth will set you free.”

When Hillcrest first opened in 1942, it was a one-room elementary school under the purview of the Church of the Brethren. By 1982 it was a K-12 institution run jointly by ten groups, including the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Assemblies of God, and the American Lutheran Church, which would soon join other bodies in forming the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Cartlidge, now president of the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee, said that when she attended Hillcrest as the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, there could be as many as 500 students at the school at a time—the children of missionaries from virtually every known Christian denomination as well as Nigerian nationals and the children of expatriates working in Nigeria.

Many missionaries see enrolling their children in boarding school as a necessity, given the nature of their work and the dangerous locales they’re sometimes assigned to. The only other option would be to leave the kids behind in their home country, seeing them only every few years. For other missionary parents, boarding schools are simply a matter of organizational policy.

Daniel Robinson, son of Canadian missionaries with Sudan Interior Mission—now called simply [SIM](#)—said that boarding school was theoretically optional for SIM families when he was growing up but that in practice it was an unwritten rule that few parents dared to question.

Robinson, who serves as vice president of the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee, attended Hillcrest as a teen in the early 1980s. His earlier education took place at [Kent Academy](#), a primary boarding school about 20 miles west of Hillcrest, founded by SIM specifically for the children of SIM missionaries. Robinson said he was required to remain in the dorms even when his father was working and living on Kent Academy grounds.

To Robinson, the message from SIM was loud and clear: children were a distraction from a missionary couple's real work of sharing the gospel.

It was in this context—children separated from their parents, supervised by adults who were, in turn, supervised by no one—that the Hillcrest survivors say abuse flourished.

"Where there is absolute control over a person's life . . . especially children, and there's very little oversight, very little checks and balances . . . and where children are an afterthought and an inconvenience, what you have just now created is an absolutely flawless, perfect breeding ground for abuse of every shape and form and flavor," Robinson said. "And missions schools are textbook examples of this exact thing."

The Hillcrest Survivors steering committee has compiled 19 pages of written abuse testimony, some of it firsthand accounts, some of it secondhand accounts of abuse that students witnessed. The firsthand allegations include stories of dorm parents smashing rabbits' heads with a hammer in front of students, a student being forced to re-eat food she had vomited up, and a male supervisor bathing preteen girls with his bare hands. Children were told their parents were going to burn in hell because they didn't believe a certain way.

Most of Robinson's abuse occurred at Kent Academy, where he says students were routinely subjected to invasive examinations of their anuses and genitals after their nightly showers. But, according to Robinson's written testimony, on one occasion at Hillcrest, James McDowell called him to his office, massaged and caressed him, and then touched his nipples.

Cartlidge—who had long considered her Hillcrest abuse to be limited to ten years of "severe psychological" bullying by a classmate and his sister—has only recently come to the realization that the sexual relationship her English teacher, Owen Fine, began grooming her for when she was 16 and initiated when she was 17 was also abuse.

"It had been really ingrained in me that I was culpable in that relationship," she said. "I always felt like it was an adult relationship—that I was an adult and made that choice."

Survivors say Hillcrest's response to their allegations has been inconsistent at best and, at times, outright dismissive, which has left them feeling frustrated and disappointed.

Right after McDowell's Facebook confession in April 2021, Hillcrest [said](#) it was working with the [Child Safety and Protection Network](#) and that it considered supporting abuse survivors to be a high priority. Yet, Cartlidge said, it took nine months for the school's superintendent, Anne Lucasse, to make time for a call with her to discuss the allegations. Then, when the two finally met over Zoom in January 2022, Lucasse was warm and sympathetic.

In an audio recording of the meeting, shared with the *Century*, Lucasse began by apologizing to Cartlidge for her experience at Hillcrest. "I realize I'm now and that was then, but it doesn't matter," she said. And when Cartlidge asked if they could jump into a discussion about self-care, Lucasse was sensitive and supportive, replying, "We can jump in wherever you want to go. And we can circle around and we can come back."

When Hillcrest's board of governors voted to support the request for an independent investigation in August, survivors considered it a major step forward. The board even formed an abuse subcommittee that drafted a letter, addressed to alumni and posted to the Hillcrest website, in support of the investigation.

But when the letter abruptly disappeared from the website, survivors were confused. On November 1, the steering committee sent an email to the board of governors, signed by Cartlidge and Robinson, inquiring about the status of the letter and voicing concerns about a subcommittee member's possible conflict of interest.

In a response, shared with the *Century*, board chairman John Brown wrote, "Who is writing this letter? Is this person authorized to deal directly with the committee constituted by the Board? Do we have Board minutes to that effect? . . . The Board is doing every possible thing concerning this matter . . . Legal matters have their own velocity."

Robinson said the tone of Brown's email was not only re-traumatizing to the survivors who read it but also proved "yet again, that we are being either ignored or at least not being taken seriously."

Perhaps most frustrating of all, the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee says Hillcrest leadership has repeatedly claimed that it has no power to launch an independent investigation. Only the missions agencies that supplied teachers and dorm parents to Hillcrest can do that—but Hillcrest also claims that it does not have complete records allowing them to identify which missions agencies those were.

In an interview with the *Century*, Lucasse said that Hillcrest's hands really are tied because of the way the Church of the Brethren structured the school 80 years ago. Unlike most other international schools—or even other missions schools, she said—Hillcrest is not an independent institution. It is owned by the missions.

“Hillcrest does not exist without the missions,” Lucasse said. “That’s why the statement [from the board] was, ‘We support the missions in doing [an independent investigation].’ Anything we can—on the ground—do to facilitate this, we will do so. We’re not holding anything back whatsoever.”

Lucasse said the school is working hard to track down personnel records for accused teachers, but Hillcrest only started hiring its own teachers 15 years ago. Before that, teachers were hired by the missions and seconded to Hillcrest—so it was the missions who kept the records, not Hillcrest. Hillcrest staff are using yearbooks to try to connect individuals and agencies, but it’s difficult because missions change names so frequently. She said it took “two hard days of digging” just to connect McDowell with the correct mission agency because the name had changed.

Last summer, the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee sent out its own request for support of the investigation to 21 groups known to have supplied teachers or dorm parents to Hillcrest—information Cartlidge said they found mostly on the school’s website. The ELCA and the United Methodist Church immediately agreed and even convened a summit on November 9 that secured the cooperation of six additional groups, essentially green-lighting the investigation.

Darr said it was a victory, albeit an imperfect one. It’s reprehensible, he said, that Hillcrest leadership has sidestepped its responsibility by expecting survivors and missions agencies to drum up support for an investigation. The abuse happened at Hillcrest, he said, so Hillcrest should be taking the lead in making things right.

Today, Hillcrest is a Christian school primarily for Nigerian nationals, and Eleanor Miner, the school’s guidance counselor and student protection officer, emphasized that since 2015, Hillcrest has been committed to a robust [student protection policy](#).

She said it's important to understand that context; these days, student safety permeates the school's culture.

Every adult who works at or regularly sets foot on campus is required to attend an annual, one-hour training led by Lucasse. Ten-foot walls and around-the-clock guards prevent anyone from leaving campus without prior approval. Teachers, staff, and parents know they can tip Miner off if they suspect students are engaging in risky behavior like bullying, smoking, or drinking. Lucasse said even the students know they can come to Miner with concerns.

"They slip a note under Eleanor's door, or they tell a friend and they come together, or they tell a teacher," Lucasse said, laughing. "Or they come themselves and say, 'This happened to a friend.' And we just smile."

But both Miner and Lucasse agreed that despite their training, Hillcrest was not adequately prepared to handle the current wave of historical abuse allegations; the past year has been a steep learning curve for them, Miner said. The abuse that occurred was wrong, Lucasse added, and contrasting the student protections Hillcrest has now to what was allowed even ten years ago makes hearing about past abuse "doubly worse."

"Which makes it all the more important that we listen well to our alumni and we walk by them," she said. "Maybe we can't do what they want, but we can still be with them regardless. And so we try and be with them as best as, sometimes, they will let us be."

Those alumni who have taken abuse allegations directly to the denominations and missions agencies—either in conjunction with or apart from the work the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee is doing with Hillcrest—have received mixed responses.

Robinson is part of an international group of alumni that has been petitioning SIM for a professional investigation of abuse claims at both Hillcrest and Kent Academy—the primary school SIM founded for its missionaries. In December 2021, tired of being stonewalled, Robinson and five others filed a civil lawsuit against SIM in North Carolina, where its US headquarters are based.

In August, a judge dismissed the case, saying that North Carolina's statute of limitations did not allow him to hear it. But two of the plaintiffs—Robinson and Jeff

Smith—have since appealed, hoping to use two Nigerian laws to their advantage.

The first states that anyone who leaves Nigeria as a child legally remains a minor until they return. Of the six original plaintiffs, only Robinson and Smith have never been back to Nigeria since turning 18, so they are still, legally, children.

The second Nigerian law holds that there is no statute of limitations when it comes to sexual offenses against children in Nigeria. And because Nigerian federal law trumps North Carolinian state law, their lawyers believe they have a shot at holding SIM accountable in court.

In a statement to the *Century*, SIM's US base said that although it grieves with anyone who has experienced harm and always seeks to respond to abuse survivors with compassion and care, it was surprised to have been named in the lawsuit.

"While some SIM USA staff children attended these schools, SIM USA did not manage either school. Both schools were run by local, independent entities in Nigeria, without operational input or oversight by SIM USA," the statement said. It also highlighted SIM's current [child safety program](#).

No one from the SIM sending offices that were invited to the November 9 Hillcrest abuse summit—SIM International, SIM USA, SIM Canada, and SIM Australia—attended. And none of them has agreed to support an independent investigation at Hillcrest.

In October 2001, Cartlidge divulged to her friend Katherine Mueller the secret of her past "relationship" with Owen Fine. Although she asked Mueller not to tell anyone, Mueller recognized that what Cartlidge was describing was actually abuse and took the information to her father, who was then the director of personnel for Fine's employer—the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Mueller told the *Century* she wrestled with the decision to disclose Cartlidge's secret because she did not want to jeopardize their friendship. But Mueller and Fine's wife traveled in the same social circles, so she also knew that the LCMS was about to send Fine to teach at an international school in Asia. In the end, she could not keep what she knew to herself.

"I can't in good faith let the LCMS send this guy over there," she said, recalling what ultimately persuaded her.

Mueller knows her father told at least one other person at LCMS headquarters because Cartlidge confronted her over the betrayal of confidence after receiving a phone call from Bruce Hartung, who, at the time, headed the department concerned with wellness among church workers.

Mueller said the LCMS did not send Fine to Asia, but she lost track of him after that.

The LCMS did not attend the November Hillcrest summit and has not lent its support to the independent investigation. In an email to the *Century*, a lawyer for the LCMS said the denomination could not confirm that Fine ever engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a Hillcrest student.

However, in May 2021, Fine's wife reached out to Cartlidge to apologize for her husband's actions.

"In NO way do I or Owen consider you culpable or in any way to blame," she said in a text message, which was shared with the *Century*. "He is 100 percent to blame. . . . We both want to acknowledge the wrong that was done to you and we want to make it right."

She also sent Cartlidge a \$5,000 check to help cover her therapy costs, which Cartlidge declined.

"It just didn't feel right," Cartlidge explained. "I don't think her intention was to buy my silence, but it felt like, at the end of the day, it was about them feeling better and not me."

McDowell, whose confession was the catalyst for much of this action, was suspended by the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada about a month after his Facebook post. Additionally, a spokesperson for the EMCC confirmed that McDowell is currently in counseling and has been instructed to refrain from all ministry with minors or vulnerable people. He has also been instructed to take no leadership position within a local church.

In a statement to the *Century*, the denomination said it was "deeply grieved" by McDowell's actions.

"The EMCC does not condone any conduct that is contrary to how Jesus commands us to live and that causes harm to others. Our hearts are heavy as we pray for all those impacted."

The EMCC attended the November summit and is supporting an independent Hillcrest investigation. Furthermore, the denomination is currently working on a new abuse prevention policy for its own use. It is also creating an online form that would allow people to report abuse through the EMCC website.

Cartlidge said the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee has been blown away by the EMCC's sincere efforts to make things right and their willingness to listen without being defensive—even though it took some time to get there. "They have really stepped up," she said.

Meanwhile, the survivors' claims and the reactions to those claims have continued to polarize what was once a close-knit community of Hillcrest alumni.

Robinson refers to the Hillcrest apologists as the Sunshine and Lollipops Crew. Every time the survivors bring up their experiences, he said the Sunshine and Lollipops Crew is quick to suggest that they all stop dwelling on the past and that they should perhaps try getting right with Jesus in order to quell the negativity in their lives.

It sounds incredible, Robinson said, but unless you've lived it, it's hard to understand the psychological hold a missions agency can have over its community.

"My father would have died before he went up against SIM," Robinson said, because in the SIM subculture, the voice of the mission is the voice of God on earth. "To argue with mission leadership is to question God. And one doesn't question God. Ever."

When Robinson told his parents about what he had seen and experienced at Hillcrest and Kent Academy, he said for many years they could not allow themselves to believe it. These are good, Christian people, his parents told him. We know them personally. Why are you doing this?

And even if someone manages to crack the illusion of sacrosanctity around a missions organization, Robinson said, sometimes the control the agency has over them makes speaking out still seem impossible.

For instance, Robinson said one woman told him that while she supported what he was doing, she could not publicly support him because her parents lived in the retirement village that SIM operates in Sebring, Florida, for former missionaries.

“And this lady was terrified that if she went up against the mission, her parents would be homeless,” Robinson said. “Because they were in their 90s, living in this retirement community, and if she turned on the mission, the mission could kick her parents out of the retirement center.”

Darr firmly believes that monetary restitution is necessary for healing. He knows of former missionary kids who have had to mortgage their homes in order to pay for the therapy related to their abuse. And yet, Darr said, he has never, in 30 years of advocacy, heard a survivor say they came forward because they wanted a check.

“Never. They don’t care about the money,” he said. “What you hear over and over, essentially, is, ‘I want my mission organization, I want my denomination, I want my church to be the church to me. Just live into and live out the values that you profess. Just do that.’”

Cartlidge told the *Century* that her medical and therapy bills are in the hundreds of thousands, but what justice means to her is having the truth exposed. She also wants Hillcrest to establish a robust, therapy-based child protection program for its current students. “Not any of this ‘We’ll send the superintendent to get trained and she gets back and trains everybody,’” she said. Real, trauma-informed care.

Robinson described his own end goal as vindication and redemption.

“Because I’ve had so many people tell me I was full of shit for so many years. I’ve had so many people tell me my faith was wrong,” he said. “Well, no. It had nothing to do with my faith. It had everything to do with the fact that I was being raised by abusive people who were using their faith as a tool of some of the deepest darkness you can possibly imagine.”

Ultimately, it’s not just one group or one institution that survivors of abuse at missionary boarding schools are up against, he said. It’s the entire theology, the whole culture that first creates the perfect conditions for abuse to take place and then gives institutions unchecked power to cover it up.

“When the mission says this is how it is, that’s how it is. There’s nobody to say this can’t happen, this is wrong. There’s nobody,” he said. “This is the mentality that has to change.”

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[Jon Mathieu](#), the *Century*'s community engagement editor, engages his colleague [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#), the *Century*'s news editor, in conversation about this article and Dawn's reporting on stories regarding abuse.