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He Took His 68-Year-Old Secret to Court and Finally Confronted His Ghost

Robin Davis spent a long career in finance and philanthropy haunted by what had happened to him as a boy. Could an unusual trial on Long Island help him find peace?

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By Michael Wilson

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The 79-year-old man sat silently in the back of the courtroom on Long Island, 20 miles from his home in Queens. He wore a dark suit over his slim frame, as if back at his old offices in Manhattan's financial corridors, at Merrill Lynch and Bank of America and other blue-chip firms.

Here the man, Robin Davis, settled in for what promised to be a strange trial in this mostly empty room. His lawsuit centered on the actions of a person long dead. His adversaries were Long Island bureaucrats who had never heard of that person or his reported misdeeds.

Generations had passed since the terrible acts that Mr. Davis described in his lawsuit, a dark stretch of weeks 68 winters ago, during the first Eisenhower administration. In this courtroom in 2024, he faced lawyers, a judge, a jury of strangers and a ghost who had haunted him for the better part of seven decades.

A ghost who had made him — for good and for bad — what he is today.

Mr. Davis had long been widely known for his philanthropy on behalf of one cause: fighting child abuse. Twenty-five years ago, he created a charity to raise money in the business community to fund boots-on-the-ground agencies in New York City and beyond that sought to treat and prevent the abuse of children.

Now, the trial would reveal the answer to a question about the charity that he'd been asked many times: Why? Why child abuse?

For years, he had come up with reasons. It's underfunded, he'd say. There's no poster child for abuse, like there is for childhood disease.

But the real reason he'd devoted himself to this singular cause would be made public in this courtroom in Mineola, when he could speak about what had happened when he was 10 years old and a new coach arrived at his school's gymnasium.

He knew the poster boy for child abuse, all right. That boy had stared back at him in the mirror, ashamed, every day for going on 70 years.

The trial stemming from Mr. Davis's lawsuit played out in a wood-paneled courtroom inside the Nassau County Courthouse in Mineola. John Minchillo/Associated Press

'I never got the words out'

Rob Davis was a student at the public Caroline G. Atkinson School in the Village of Freeport when, in the fifth grade, he brought home a permission slip to join an evening basketball clinic at the school. His mother signed it, and the boy showed up on the first night, short and scrawny and hardly able to throw a basketball with enough force to reach the basket.

But a coach he'd never seen before, Vernon Alleyne, was encouraging, and praised him when Rob finally made a basket. The coach offered him a ride home later and pulled over around the corner of the school to give him candy, Mr. Davis recalled in sworn testimony and in an interview.

"'Have you ever seen a big man's penis?'" Mr. Davis recalled that the coach asked. "I said, 'My father.' He said, 'Well, we're going to be friends. I'd like you to see mine.'"

The coach went on to touch the boy's privates and, later, during a series of escalating encounters in the same car, parked in the same spot, forced him to perform oral sex, Mr. Davis said.

During the weeks of abuse, the coach gave the boy money to buy himself candy, and Mr. Davis said he ate so much that he developed a mouthful of cavities that made his father, a spendthrift facing new dental bills, angry.

No one realized that his mouthful of decay was a clue that something was wrong. It was the only clue. Because he said nothing.

"I never told my mother and father," he said in an interview. "I never got the words out of my mouth."

And for the rest of his life, he has lived with guilt and shame over that silence.

"He never got caught," he said of the coach. "Because of me, how many people did that guy nail? Because I didn't tell my mother? That's crushing to me."

Success and a self-destructive side

Ten-year-old Rob Davis quit the basketball clinic. He eventually graduated from high school, then college, and life went on, and on paper, Mr. Davis seemed to thrive.

He taught in the Freeport schools for a year. He started work at an advertising agency in 1968, for the General Foods brand. He went on to Xerox Learning Systems and later became a stockbroker for Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley and other firms in the 1970s and 1980s. He ended up at McAlinden Research Partners, an investment strategy think tank looking for up-and-coming stocks. He remains at that firm today.

But all along, he carried a thinly hidden obsession. It was understandable, even noble. But it was self-destructive. He could not tolerate any situation in which he believed someone — especially a child, but anyone, really — was being mistreated or treated unfairly. Or, of course, abused.

His revulsion to it was physical, as if he was trying to compensate for his inaction that winter when he was a 10-year-old boy who did not speak up when it mattered. As an adult, he spoke up all the time.

During his brief career teaching, he became convinced that three of his fourth-grade students were probably being abused at home. He reported his suspicions to the school nurse and the principal. We'll handle it, he was told. But he didn't stop there.

Mr. Davis, then 22, visited the homes of the three children to confront the adults living there. One father armed himself with a knife and ordered the teacher to leave. He did not. A neighbor called the police. Officers escorted Mr. Davis off the property.

After he moved into finance, this tendency played out in the boardroom.

In 1987, after jobs at several firms with increasingly higher paychecks, he was recruited by Dillon Read, an investment bank, for $340,000 a year, the most money he had ever made. That ended the following year, when he felt the chief executive was behaving unfairly and confronted him about it.

"How did that discussion go?" Mr. Davis was asked in a deposition in 2022.

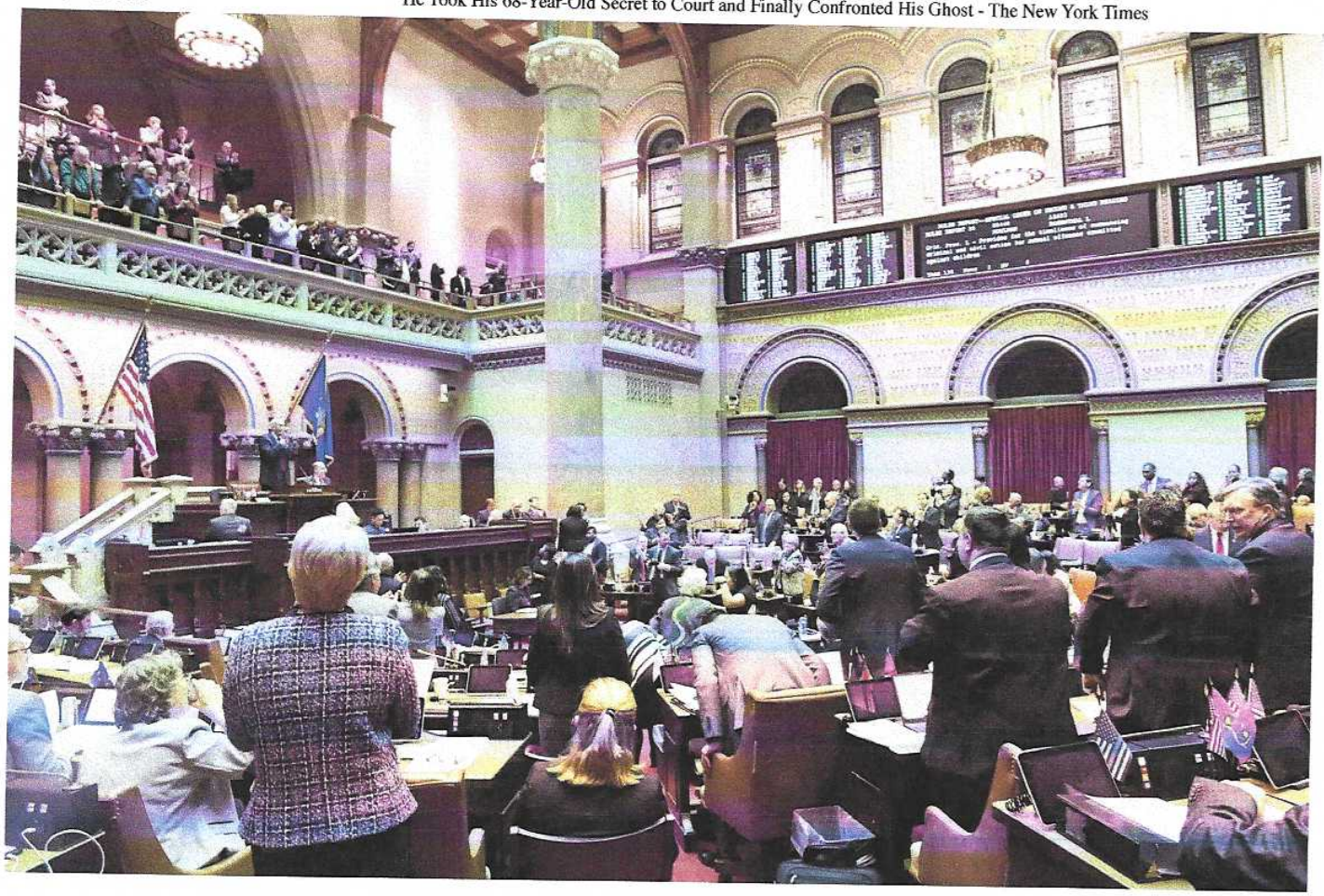
"Not well." He was let go two days later.

Similar exits took place at Rosenkrantz Lyon & Ross, a brokerage firm ("Things happening that I thought were improper") Bank of America ("I felt they were being unfair") and Concept Capital ("It was a very toxic situation, and I had no real power there to do anything except just suck it up.")

And after work, he brought his feelings of distrust home with him, he said. He was married three times, and each union ended in divorce.

He blamed himself. "My reactions to little things that happened, my defensiveness, my fear of commitment," he said in the deposition.

He hadn't seen the coach in decades, but when he lashed out like this, it was as if he were that boy back in that car in Freeport.



State lawmakers in 2019 passed the Child Victims Act, which opened the door for Mr. Davis's lawsuit.
Hans Pennink/Associated Press

Taking the stand

In 2019, the New York State Legislature passed the Child Victims Act, which allowed a window during which victims of childhood abuse could sue those they felt were responsible, regardless of whether the statute of limitations had passed. Thousands of lawsuits were filed, many involving abuse dating back to the 1990s, the 1980s and earlier.

Mr. Davis decided it was time to go public: "It's just a way of trying to get even with life a little bit."

His lawsuit in 2021 would become among the oldest on file, with the abuse having happened in 1956. As a result, the case brought unique challenges.

"Do you have any documentation or paperwork regarding this basketball program?" Mr. Davis was asked during the deposition in 2022.

"I don't."

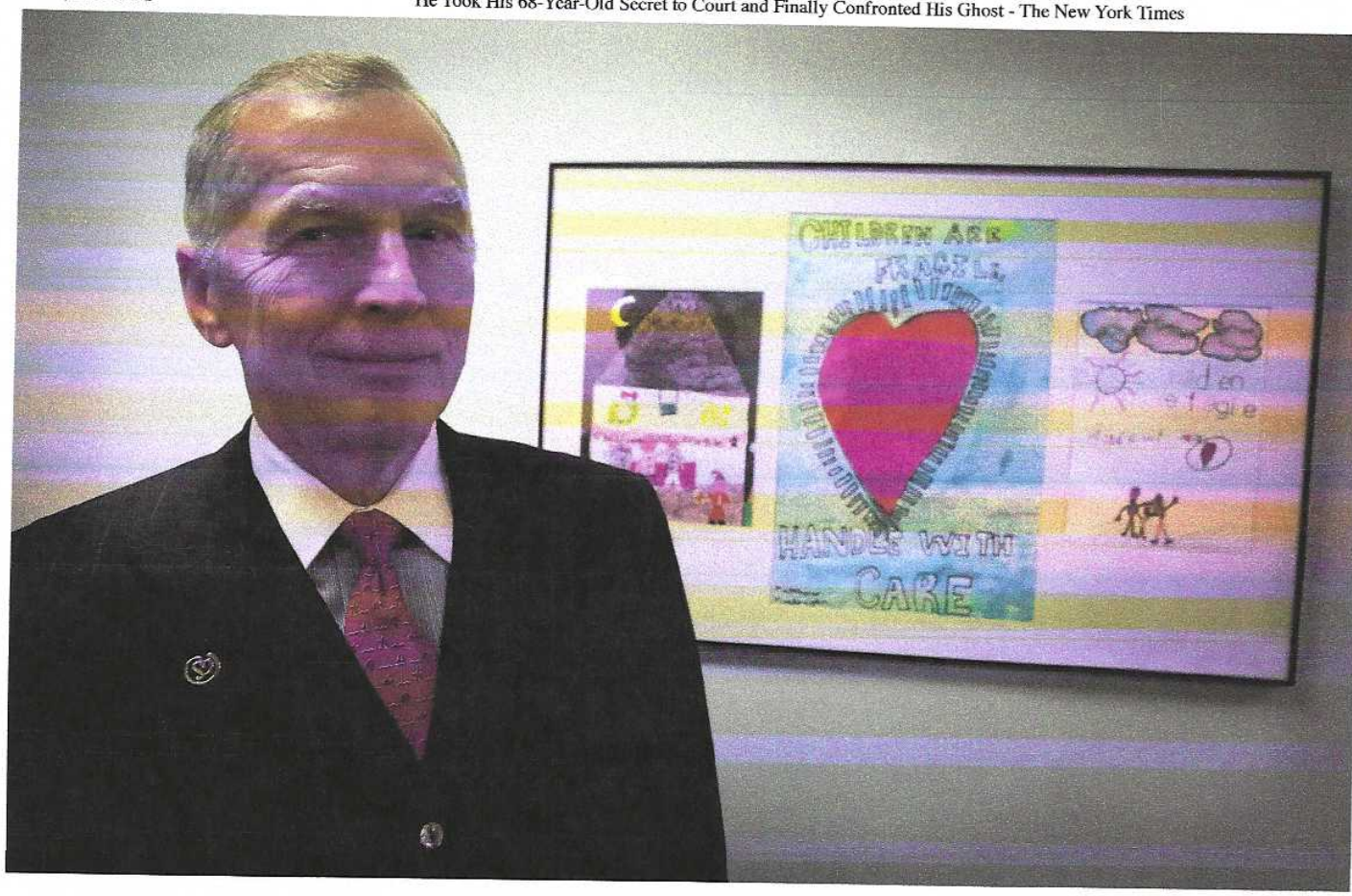
The trial began on July 17. Freeport officials said they had found no trace of a Vernon Alleyne coaching basketball or anything else in the 1950s, and only a few mentions of him in old payroll ledgers in the early 1960s.

Vernon Alleyne is not a defendant in the case, and no one was called to testify on his behalf. Little was revealed about the man besides a home address on an old payroll entry, on Colonial Avenue in Freeport. Public records indicate that a man with that name who once lived at that address died in 2008.

Mr. Davis took the witness stand and faced the jury to tell his story. He explained how the details of the abuse returned to him in his dreams, and said that only exhausting himself by running and bicycling long distances eased his anxiety. He said he is haunted by the fact that he didn't speak up.

"I could not get the words out," he testified. "It's horrifying, the fact I didn't tell my mother — it would have stopped him in his tracks. She knew the police, she knew everybody in town."

A psychologist hired by Mr. Davis's lawyers testified about the effects of trauma on a person. The judge paused testimony when he noticed a juror sleeping and called for a coffee break. But Mr. Davis, listening in court, was riveted.



In 2007, Mr. Davis visited the Manhattan Children's Advocacy Center, one of the anti-child abuse organizations that received money from the charity he ran. Richard Perry/The New York Times

An outlet

In the late 1990s, public sentiment toward the industry where Mr. Davis worked was at a new low. "Hedge fund" was shorthand for unchecked greed, unearned wealth. Mr. Davis came up with a public-relations strategy to show off the industry's generosity, and he created a charity, Hedge Funds Care. He named its single focus: to fight child abuse.

Through that work, he found an outlet, and he poured himself into the minutia of the agencies seeking grants from the charity. He visited a pediatrician in Manhattan who examined children for signs of abuse.

But he kept his own story a secret. He told The New York Times in 2007 that his interest in the area emerged from his brief time as a teacher. "There are so few big organizations that do child abuse work," he said in that interview. "There's no

poster child for the movement, because it's such a painful subject."

He later renamed the charity Help For Children. Now 25 years old, it has given away some $61 million and has chapters in five countries.

Mr. Davis remained the face of the organization and even performed with a jazz combo at fund-raisers, singing oldies and American standards — "I've Got You Under My Skin," "Teenager in Love," "My Way."

During the trial, the village's attorney, Deanna Panico, sought to undermine Mr. Davis's claims of pain and suffering by showing jurors videos of him singing in nightclubs in his tuxedo. Is this, she asked, what pain and suffering look like?

"I think it accurately portrayed the joy I was able to get out of doing that sort of thing," Mr. Davis replied. "What's a person to do? Just be miserable the rest of their life just because something bad happened to them?"

He'd worked with a lawyer, Catherine Napolitano, in the charity's early days, but some 15 years would pass before he told her what had happened to him as a boy.

Now all the hours he put into the charity made sense — "OK, I get it," Ms. Napolitano remembers thinking. "He's so passionate about this because his heart is in it. He really understands what these other kids went through."

The day he told her, she said she had wondered, over the years. But she had never felt it was her place to ask.

A verdict, and an absolution

After a weeklong trial, the jury reached a verdict. It found that Mr. Davis had been molested by Mr. Alleyne. But it also found that the Village of Freeport was not responsible for or liable for what had happened.

Mr. Davis had wanted to hit the village in its wallet to send a message. Instead, he left court crestfallen.

"That seems to be the height of irresponsibility," he said while driving home to Queens. His lawyers, Jared Scotto and Nicholas Wise, had asked for whatever financial damages the jurors found appropriate, and their answer was zero.

Mr. Davis said he'd hoped to pump whatever money he was awarded into the charity.

Mr. Davis's charity raised tens of millions of dollars and hosted annual galas in Manhattan. Josh Wong/Josh Wong Photography

"I could have gone out with a big bang, so to speak," he said. "It would have been a nicely poignant thing to do that."

But something else had happened during that trial, something that felt to him like a different kind of verdict. It was during the dry testimony of the psychologist, Valentina Stoycheva, which had put a juror to sleep.

She had been explaining that besides the familiar "fight or flight" responses to trauma, there is another — "The three F's," she called them.

"The 'freeze' response," Dr. Stoycheva said. "Which is, basically, your nervous system tells you stop whatever else you are doing, just endure, just survive, just make sure you get through this."

Mr. Davis, listening, silently wept into his hand.

That single word, "freeze," was like a pardon, handed down upon a 10-year-old boy who had lived with the weight of having said nothing. To the 79-year-old man he became, that word swept in feelings altogether new to him. Absolved. Not guilty.

"That was something of — relief is the wrong word. But explanation," he said later. "I've never been able to explain that, even to myself."

He drove toward home, the city skyline before him, the village and the parked car and the ghost at his back.

Kirsten Noyes contributed research.

***A correction was made on Aug. 5, 2024**: An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a public school in Freeport, N.Y. It is Caroline G. Atkinson School, not Carolyn.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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