

## Epstein: A mom's journey with the Friedmans

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By ARLINE EPSTEIN



Photo credit: Newsday, 1987 / George Argeroplos | Jesse Friedman and his father Arnold Friedman leave the District Court in Mineola after arraignment in a sexual abuse case.

Hysteria ensnared Great Neck 25 years ago when scores of allegations of sexual abuse were lodged against Arnold Friedman, his son, Jesse, and a teenage friend. All three, after being presented with unspeakable charges based on the testimony of 14 little boys, pleaded guilty.

Soon after, Jesse recanted and said he was innocent. Ten years ago, the film "Capturing the Friedmans" cast doubt over the entire case. And in 2010, after a federal appeals court criticized the case's handling, finding there was a "reasonable likelihood Jesse Friedman was [wrongfully](#)

[convicted](#)," [Nassau](#) District Attorney Kathleen Rice agreed to revisit Jesse Friedman's conviction. She is expected to issue a decision soon.

Our family was near the center of this tragedy. My 9-year-old son took computer classes at the Friedman home. I was led to believe that he and friends had suffered the most heinous crimes. He spoke with detectives three times, and I was contacted by the lead detective. For years I felt terrible guilt that I had failed to protect my son from acts too shocking to be believed.

The problem is, I no longer believe they happened. Instead, I now believe Jesse Friedman, who helped in his father's classes, went to prison for 13 years for crimes he did not commit -- crimes no one committed. (Arnold Friedman killed himself in prison in 1995 at age 64.)

Recently I found notes I took during those Friedman years. These, along with new evidence, beam a dramatic spotlight at the profound flaws in this case.

In notes from a parents meeting with police, only two days before the Friedman arrests, I wrote that police "had no child out of 30-plus interviewed that had been sodomized." Another note describes a parents meeting when an assistant district attorney said there were 400 or more probable victims -- even though only four boys had testified. Through the entire case, only 14 alleged child victims ever testified against Jesse Friedman.

Those young accusers -- along with scores of others who never disclosed abuse -- were subjected to aggressive interrogation, including prolonged and repeated interviews. My notes document police interviews of five and seven hours, and repeated detective visits to individuals, including five to one boy whose testimony led to sodomy charges. This young man later unconditionally recanted his accusations in a recorded interview that was presented at screenings of the filmmakers' evidence reel in [Great Neck](#) and in Manhattan.

In the initial investigation, my son insisted nothing had happened. He held out through the detectives' questioning, and then through months of group therapy focused on helping children "remember." After group therapy came months of individual therapy -- along with my gentle but persistent questioning, at the suggestion of his therapist. Finally, my son talked. He told his therapist, and later me, detailed stories that matched the acts of abuse we'd been told about by detectives. But he refused to make a statement to police or testify to the grand jury.

Now I know why. None of his stories were true.

Six months ago my son, now a grown man, told me he made a conscious decision to lie, in the hope that it would end the incessant questioning and pressure. Having heard stories from police, therapists, other kids and even me, he parroted them back, inserting himself as a victim. When he told me this, all of the inconsistencies and questions from that time started to make sense. Although he sat near several of the complainants in dozens of classes in which police alleged abuse took place, my son saw no one sexually abused.

It is a great relief that my son was not abused. But other families also need this same relief. Indeed, there were many victims of this case -- victims of manipulation, overzealousness, exaggeration, misinformation and hysteria. And there were the victims who went to prison.

It is time for District Attorney Kathleen Rice to do the right thing and overturn the wrongful conviction of Jesse Friedman.

*Arline Epstein, who lived in Great Neck for 17 years, now lives in Greenwich, Conn.*