

OCCIDENTAL BOARD
PRESBYTERIAN MISSION HOUSE

The
Safe Place
That
Became
Unsafe

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Founded by the Presbyterian Church as the Occidental Mission Home for Girls, Cameron House has provided San Francisco's Chinatown with a range of community, youth, and religious programs for nearly 150 years.

RESCUE MISSION

By JULIA FLYNN SILER • Photos by PENNI GLADSTONE

San Francisco's Cameron House began providing refuge in 1874, protecting those vulnerable to sexual abuse. That changed with the arrival of pastor Grandpa Dick in the 1940s.

In late March 2007, Satsuki Ina, a Bay Area therapist specializing in the treatment of community trauma, headed to Medford, Oregon, on a mission.

Her destination was the Rogue Valley Manor, a hilltop retirement community founded by three Protestant churches. Accompanied by a San Francisco church official named Craig N. Palmer, she arrived on a rain-swept Monday afternoon, a few weeks before Easter.

A long drive led up to a 10-story apartment building. They stepped into a light-filled reception area brimming with lilies—a traditional Christian symbol of purity. Ina was struck by the contrast between their dark undertaking and the ethereal setting. Turning to Palmer, she said, "This looks like we're in heaven."

At the reception desk, Ina and Palmer asked for a resident named Dick Wichman. The receptionist asked if they meant Franz. In a nod to his German heritage, Wichman had dropped the nickname Dick and let the Rogue Valley Manor staff know that he preferred to be called by his baptismal name.

The receptionist asked them to wait, explaining that Wichman was "in the chapel right now" but would be there shortly. Eventually, an old man, bald, with bright blue eyes, and wearing a dark purple shirt, approached, smiling and using a walker. Wichman had been expecting them.

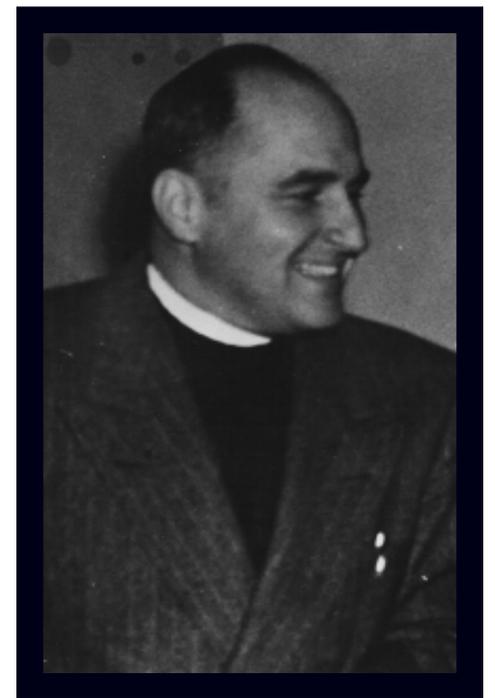
Riding an elevator up to his apartment, they were met with a spectacular view of the surrounding green landscape. The 94-year-old had lived alone there since the death of his wife four years earlier.

Wichman insisted that Ina and Palmer enjoy looking toward Roxy Ann Peak in the Western Cascades while he sat with his back turned to the picture window. On the walls and shelves were dozens of photos from his days as a pastor in which he appeared with his arms slung casually over the shoulders of Chinese boys.

The therapist has one word for the experience of at long last meeting and confronting the predatory former pastor, whom she and Palmer hoped would finally apologize to his victims.

"Chilling."

THE PREDATOR



F.S. DICK WICHMAN

*"They loved me,
and I was doing
my job."*

The charismatic man who would later be known as Grandpa Dick first arrived in San Francisco's Chinatown around 1940. A few months before his ordination as a Presbyterian minister, he had written to a national church official to ask for a job and express his "keen interest in specialized work with boys and young people." Salaries, he noted, "do not enter into our thinking," referring to himself and his bride.

After a brief stint as a "boys worker" at a church for Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, F.S. "Dick" Wichman returned to San Francisco in 1942 and began organizing programs for the Chinatown YMCA. Five years later, the hip pastor who wore jeans and a clerical collar was hired as the executive director of nearby Cameron House. Then in his late 20s, Wichman rolled up his sleeves to renovate the old building and soon brought his programs and some of the YMCA boys over to his new job.

Cameron House had been founded as the Occidental Board Mission House for Girls in 1874 by a small group of Presbyterian churchwomen who decided there was a need for a safe house for trafficked Chinese girls. From its chaotic early days to a triumphant court case in the 1930s in which the leaders of a major human-trafficking ring were convicted, the home was a refuge. Up until the late 1930s, it employed a doorkeeper to make sure that men who might be traffickers or sex abusers stayed out. Over this long history, Cameron House was run by a staff of white and Asian women.

The house at 920 Sacramento Street was an important institution in Chinatown in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, especially for vulnerable girls and women who had recently arrived from China. But after its long-serving superintendent Donaldina Cameron retired in the late 1930s, the church decided to turn the battered brick building into a language school. A decade later, leaders saw a need for summer programs for kids in Chinatown who otherwise would be roaming the neighborhood's alleys with nothing to do. They decided to turn Cameron House into a community center focusing on youth, and they hired Wichman as its first male director.

Thousands of Chinatown's boys and girls went on to participate in its programs over the years. Many became leaders in their community. But Cameron House entered a grim chapter in its history when Wichman arrived in 1947. Under his leadership, it was transformed from what had been a refuge for girls and young women who'd been sexually abused into a place that was profoundly unsafe for boys and young men. By one count, there are 40

known victims of Wichman—all of whom he raped or molested when they were boys, and all Chinese. Some estimate the actual number may be in the hundreds. The abuse took place over four decades.

"For years, I didn't feel comfortable walking into Cameron House," says Noël Chun, a San Francisco-based artist and business owner who began participating in the youth programs as an 11-year-old in 1965 and became one of Wichman's many victims. "There was this unspoken tragedy that happened in the building.... One of the most tragic parts of the abuse is that in this sort of insulated community, with all these other adults around, it happened over such a long period of time."

Only now is Cameron House fully grappling with this horrific history, including its racial aspects. A short documentary released this year, *Our Healing Journey*, relates how both the institution and Wichman's individual victims have begun to heal. But the story is far darker and more complex than the title of the documentary suggests. Wichman's

decades of unchecked abuse are a case study of a type of sexual predation in which perpetrators take advantage of cultural norms that keep their victims from speaking out. The story is also about the effects of white supremacy on a tightly knit Chinese community—and how that community finally overcame its long silence to acknowledge the truth.

Stocky and barrel-chested, the Reverend F.S. Wichman led Cameron House as its executive director from 1947 to 1977, remaining connected to it for another decade after his official retirement. He seemed to tower over his young Chinese charges, to whom he'd lean down to press his face against their cheeks in what he called "whisker rubs" and to wrap them in full-body bear hugs.

Also called Dad and Papa Dick by generations of families in San Francisco's Chinatown, Wichman was considered by many of his congregants to be a brilliant minister. He became the bridge between the Presbyterian Church's national organization and the Chinatown community. In addition to leading Cameron House, he was a co-pastor of the nearby Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, the first Asian American church in North America. He inspired many youth-program participants—two dozen or more—to become ordained by the church.

Church membership grew under Wichman's watch, and he led a rapid expansion of Cameron House's youth programs. The day camps alone enrolled more than 1,000 kids some summers. Under his leadership, Cameron House reoriented its focus from vulnerable girls to boys. Wichman handpicked mostly male leaders for key roles in running the youth programs. Reporting to two church organizations, the Presbyterian Church's National Board of Missions and the San Francisco Presbytery, a regional administrative group for churches in four Bay Area counties, Wichman gained renown for his work and traveled the country giving sermons. He was even awarded an honorary doctorate of divinity in 1964 by Westminster College in Salt Lake City.

The nearly four decades Wichman spent in Chinatown, first at the YMCA and then as Cameron House's executive director, were a pivotal time in what some historians would later call the American Century. He arrived at Cameron House just after World War II, when Chinatown had transformed itself into a glamorous

nightlife destination with clubs such as Forbidden City, the Kubla Khan, and Shangri-La. The status of Chinese Americans had dramatically shifted after China had become an ally of the United States: the Chinese Exclusion Act, in its various forms, had been lifted in 1943, filling Chinatown with optimism. At the same time, a generational shift was underway in the 1940s, as second-generation Chinese Americans for the first time became the majority of the ethnic Chinese population in the United States.

Wichman encouraged self-exploration and social engagement among his young charges, focusing on leadership training as the country moved through the Cold War, the Kennedy years, and the Asian American rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As he wrote in 1962, he saw Cameron House's mission as "mediating the love of Christ to the destitute, the rejected, and the oppressed of its community and neighborhood" and making "the Gospel relevant to

THE WHISTLEBLOWER



ELAINE CHAN-SCHERER

*"Ok, now,
this is personal-
'cause that's one
of my kids."*

the disorders of the day.”

A large number of San Francisco’s future civic leaders came through the Cameron House youth programs in the 1960s, including the Reverend Norman Fong, who went on to head the powerful Chinatown Community Development Center, and the Reverend Harry Chuck, who led the fight for low-income housing in the neighborhood as Wichman’s successor. The Reverend Calvin Chinn and Marion Kwan were two “Cameron House kids” who marched with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma.

As the environmental movement grew in the 1960s and ’70s, Wichman also showed thousands of kids from densely packed Chinatown the beauty of redwood groves and the Sierra Nevada, some for the first time. For decades, he owned a cabin in Marin County near Muir Woods and organized overnight and weeklong summer outings, the kind of trips that many families could not otherwise afford. Known as Dick’s Cabin, the rustic structure was about a 15-minute hike from the entrance to Muir Woods. Sometimes the kids would go on hikes through the redwoods.

In 1977, Wichman retired with a full pension from the Presbyterian Church. He chose Chuck as his successor from among the many young men he’d mentored through the youth programs and inspired to join the ministry. After he retired, Wichman, as “pastor emeritus,” continued to visit some of his favorite parishioners and “boys” at their homes and colleges. He also welcomed their visits to the Presbyterian retirement home in Los Gatos, where he and his wife, Lois, a fellow seminarian, had settled after moving out of the rooms they’d occupied at Cameron House.

One such visitor was a troubled 15-year-old named David Hall, the adopted son of a church elder named Sharlene Hall, who’d grown up at Cameron House and regarded Wichman as a surrogate father. Hall urged her son to visit the family’s beloved pastor in Los Gatos in 1977, only to learn, a decade later, that during that visit, “Grandpa (Dick) had tried to get into his underpants.” Hall, who has struggled with her guilt over that for decades, said “it just blows my mind I was so naive.”

In 1987, a decade after his retirement, Wichman returned to San Francisco for a blowout party at a cavernous warehouse-pier at the historic Fort Mason Center. Inside, volunteers tried to tie colorful helium balloons securely enough so they wouldn’t float up to the 50-foot ceiling. The party, a celebration of his 75th birthday, was also the occasion for Cameron House’s annual fundraiser. Planning it had taken a year, nearly a thousand people came, and sponsors included Pacific Bell, the U.S. Leasing Corp., the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, and the YMCA.

Planning the party had taken a year, and. Wichman, bald and bespectacled, wore a flower lei around his neck as the guest of honor. One of the partygoers was Elaine Chan-Scherer, a 28-year-old former Cameron House staffer. She was seated toward the front as she listened to Wichman’s remarks, in which he joked about what he called the “deserved whisker rubs” campers got for being late to a camp meal, described himself as “an opportunist for Christ,” and admitted to such misbehavior as dumping kids in a pool and pushing them down mountain slopes.

“The perpetrator stands before you,” he said.

It wasn’t so much the retired pastor’s attempts at humor that un-

settled Chan-Scherer. Rather, it was the chill she felt after hearing one of the former youth program participants fondly recall skinny-dipping at night with him. Many summers, Wichman had organized trips to a Presbyterian retreat called Westminster Woods, in Sonoma County. On those trips, Wichman and the boys would strip off their clothes and jump into the pool at night, a ritual that came to be called a “chocolate swim” because the naked swimming was followed by hot chocolate and cookies. This nighttime activity—which was mandatory—sometimes involved such games as keep-away, in which boys or the burly pastor himself would pounce on the person holding the ball.

And then there was the song performed for the party’s guest of honor. Set to the tune of the 1970 hit song “Mill Valley,” the lyrics had been rewritten to jokingly refer to the many youth clubs Wichman had helped establish. The new lines also referenced the rashes the boys would get—nubs—because the pastor would rub his face on theirs.

*And Dick likes all the crazy clubs, he lets them know with his whisker rubs
And that is why all the kids around, have the nubs*

These often-told stories—Dick’s whisker rubs, the nighttime swims, how Christianity offered these boys opportunities they would otherwise never have been given—would soon take on a new, sordid meaning for the community.

At the time of the party, a former participant in the Cameron House youth programs was rumored to be on his deathbed with AIDS. He died three days after the celebration. His mother had discovered love letters from Wichman to her son and had learned from those letters that her son had been afraid of the now-retired pastor. That alarmed Chan-Scherer, who knew the family of the participant. Chan-Scherer had become a social worker and was aware of California’s Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, passed in 1980, which mandated her to report instances of suspected child sex abuse.

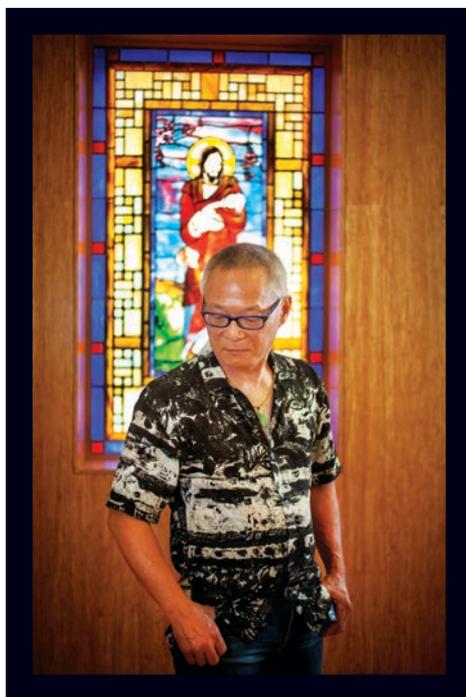
Soon after the party, Chan-Scherer heard that one of the college kids she’d worked with at Cameron House, who’d come through the youth programs, that Wichman had tried to French-kiss him while visiting him on campus. She’d heard rumors before, but nothing so specific. “I thought, OK, now this is personal—’cause that’s one of my kids,” recalls Chan-Scherer. “I knew that I had to say something.”

She approached the pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown in Decem-

ber 1987, about two months after the party at Fort Mason. Acting as a whistleblower, she shared the stories she had heard. The San Francisco Presbytery began investigating. Nine men testified under oath to a church disciplinary committee that Wichman had sexually molested them when they were between the ages of 14 and 16. Those instances of abuse had happened over decades. The hearings were held behind closed doors.

One of the victims who testified before the committee was Noël Chun. He was also one of the first to go public with their story. Chun, like many of Wichman’s victims, grew up in a fatherless household. He’d been raised by a single mother of three in the Tenderloin and first went to Cameron House as a middle schooler. He joined youth groups, played basketball, and eventually became a leader and one of Wichman’s favorites—the powerful pastor offered him praise and love in a way that Chun now sees was a form of grooming. Wichman became a surrogate father to him, so when the married pastor invited him, at

AMONG THE FIRST TO SPEAK UP



NOËL CHUN
*“I looked
to [Wichman]
for my
moral compass.”*

16, to sleep in his private bedroom with him at the cabin, the teenager welcomed the attention.

Their sexual relationship, which included penetrative sex, lasted from 1970 into the 1980s, after Wichman had retired and Chun had become a legal adult. The damage was also lasting. By 1988, Chun's first marriage had collapsed because of his infidelity. "I looked to [Wichman] for my moral compass, and he just sort of warped that," he recalls. Chun's second marriage also failed, for similar reasons.

In late 1988, after the San Francisco Presbytery's closed-door investigation, Chun entered the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown for a congregational meeting to discuss what the disciplinary committee had discovered about the retired pastor. Then in his mid-30s, Chun sat toward the back of the packed sanctuary, which could hold hundreds of people for worship services. Well respected by the community, he'd served as a deacon and an elder in the church.

Some congregants refused to believe the anonymous stories the committee shared and were angry. Chun raised his hand and stood up. "I'm a victim," he told the gathering. His revelation was shocking. He's forgotten much of what happened next, but he left early. "That day changed my relationship to the church," he recalls, and over the next few months he realized that people he'd grown up with and worshipped with for many years thought he was lying. Not being believed was "devastating," he recalls, and he lost trust in the institutional church.

The allegations deeply divided Chinatown. Some in the community refused to believe that their beloved pastor could have sexually molested children and teens. Since the San Francisco Presbytery had chosen to seal the findings of its investigation, their names and stories were never publicly revealed. Some parishioners actively defended Wichman. "There was a great deal of denial," explains Reverend Chuck, who first met Wichman at the Chinatown YMCA in the early 1940s and was one of the boys who followed him to Cameron House. "He was like a father figure to a lot of us."

In "a statement of Charges and Specifications," the church's disciplinary committee planned to bring five specific charges against Wichman including "adultery (for sexual activity with boys under the age of 18 while married), perjury (for continuing to deny inappropriate sexual activity) and inappropriate interference in the governance of Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown," which would have led to a formal church trial by the San Francisco Presbytery. However, Wichman denied everything and formally left the Presbyterian faith in November 1988—in a process called demitting—before proceedings could get underway. The committee had consulted the San Francisco district attorney's office about pressing criminal charges but had been told that the statute of limitations for sexual abuse cases had run out. (The lawyer from the D.A.'s office who met with church officials could not be reached for comment.) Meanwhile, more victims began stepping forward.

About three years after Wichman quit the faith, he and his wife left California and moved to the Rogue Valley Manor in Medford. Then, in 1996, California's Supreme Court retroactively extended the statute of limitations, which meant that Wichman's victims could file criminal charges against him in the state. Writing to friends to tell them of their move, the Wichmans lovingly described the property, with its Olympic-size swimming pool, bowling greens, computer room, and private

walking trails. They wrote that they did miss their more "cosmopolitan" life in California and that "Oregon is white in more ways than their [*sic*] snow-capped mountains."

But overall, they described their new home as "heaven."

A glaring racial issue cut through the scandal—a white clergyman had abused Chinese boys for decades without anyone doing anything about it. Wichman, who didn't speak Chinese, regularly seemed to disrespect Chinese culture and language. "I remember he used to mispronounce Chinese just to make fun of our language," Reverend Chinn notes. "And we would let him get away with it; we didn't challenge him." Chinn, who

was a pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown from 1990 until he retired in 2006 and who was also one of Wichman's victims, recalls that Wichman tried to "squench people at Cameron House" who were involved in the Asian American civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s.

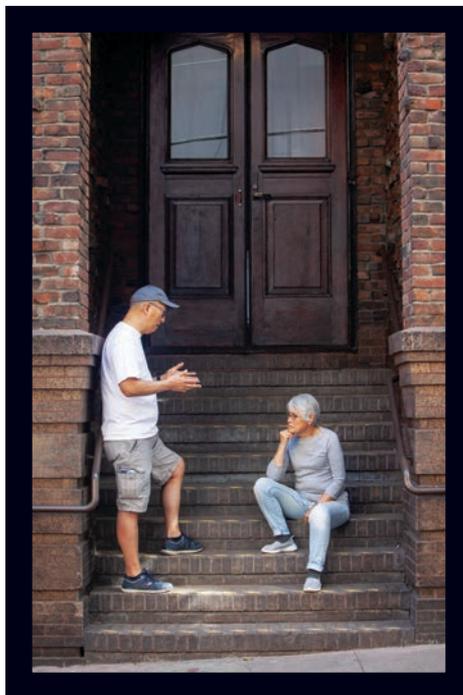
During an era when Asian American students at San Francisco State University and elsewhere went on strike to demand ethnic studies programs, Wichman built many of Cameron House's programs around his own family's German traditions and songs. There was no celebration of Chinese New Year, even though the surrounding neighborhood resounded with the pop of fireworks and the drumming from parades featuring colorful lion dancers. Instead, the mostly Chinese kids at Cameron House would mark the pastor's birthday in October with a celebration dubbed National Chocolate Sunday that included performances of German folk songs like "Lina, my Lina, her second name is Biddle." "Chinese was inferior" to Wichman, Chinn recalls. "Anything associated with Chinese was not good enough."

Wichman worked with many second-generation and third-generation Chinese American kids who spoke English and were more assimilated into mainstream American culture than their parents. Many parents of children who attended the youth programs at Cameron House, as new immigrants from China, spoke little or no English. During Wichman's decades as co-pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, he added an English-speaking-only congregation of youth—which worshipped in Cameron House's big hall as well as the nearby

church. The effect was to shift power away from the Chinese-speaking church elders and toward the English-speaking pastor—and to further separate the English-speaking youth from their parents.

Language and cultural barriers also contributed to a sense of paralysis and powerlessness in the years following the San Francisco Presbytery's stymied efforts to seek justice. Chuck and local Presbyterian Church authorities mostly chose not to continue to pursue or publicly air concerns about Wichman, in part because the statute of limitations had run out, but also because Cameron House was undergoing an expensive earthquake retrofit and fundraising became a priority. There was a fear that talking about Wichman's abuse would undermine support for the effort. Cameron House and the Presbytery failed to "actively encourage a full exploration of the truth," according to a 2003 report to Cameron House's board of directors. When the subject did come up during a Lenten discussion series in 1998, a longtime congre-

CHANGE AGENTS



GREG CHAN (LEFT) AND
DOREEN DER-MCLEOD

*"The place felt like
the Bates Motel in Psycho,"
Greg Chan says.*

gant verbally attacked Chinn, as the pastor who had broached it.

There was institutional confusion as well: Wichman had reported—at least on paper—to both the national and the regional Presbyterian Church. With many changes in personnel and reporting relationships over the decades, there had been spotty oversight, giving him the “freedom to lead as he saw fit,” says Palmer, who in June 2006 was brought in to serve as the head of the San Francisco Presbytery by the church’s national organization.

Shame on the part of the victims also contributed to those years of silence. Some didn’t think they’d be believed over the word of a powerful and popular pastor—a common occurrence in cases of clergy sex abuse. “Who’s going to take the word of a dumb Chinaman, or a dumb Chinaman’s parents, against him, the great white hope?” former Cameron House board chair Greg Chan says, referring to Wichman. “It’s like white privilege exponentially on steroids. If you can go into a community and rape their little boys” without apparent consequences, says Chan, then “you think you can get away with it.”

Fourteen years passed. In late 2001, an unassuming Chinese American woman named Doreen Der-McLeod stepped in as Cameron House’s new executive director. After a board meeting that year, Der-McLeod and then-chair Chan walked out to Cameron House’s small parking lot, off Joice Alley. Chan, a onetime youth group participant who had been abused by Wichman, said, “Doreen, we’ve got to do something about this...” “The place,” he says, “felt like the Bates Motel in *Psycho*.”

There is no doubt that Cameron House, rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake with salvaged clinker bricks, has long had a deeply unsettled atmosphere, stretching back to the 19th century, when desperate girls would hide in its basement to elude their captors. To this day, some consider it a haunted house. As Chan explains, “we had not cleaned up the shrouded energy,” in large part because of a feeling of shame. Together, Der-McLeod and Chan proposed establishing a Healing Task Force so the organization could fully confront and heal from the decades of abuse that had taken place under Wichman’s leadership.

The Catholic clergy abuse scandal was in the headlines at the time, and Cameron House faced its own potentially devastating financial fallout: its directors feared that fundraising could dry up if the accusations against the organization became public, and there was the graver risk of civil lawsuits. Then, in July of that year, California’s governor, Gray Davis, signed Senate Bill 1779, which opened a one-year window for lawsuits to be filed against employers and other responsible third parties in child sex abuse cases.

It was an existential threat to Cameron House. “We had to walk on eggs. We just hoped we wouldn’t bring the institution down because we were trying to do right,” Chan recalls, referring to its decision to publicly acknowledge the wrong done to Wichman’s victims.

The Healing Task Force, which consisted of past and present church members and youth-program participants, met with survivors and secondary victims (such as spouses) for a year and a half. After its formation, more victims began coming forward, eventually bringing the total to 18. In November 2003, the task force delivered a 53-page report to Cameron House’s board. The report included anonymous but

detailed first-person accounts of the abuse by 12 of Wichman’s primary and secondary victims. The task force told the board that it believed the allegations against Grandpa Dick.

The accounts revealed that Wichman had caused both physical and spiritual harm. As one survivor wrote, “Dick was a monster who lived among us disguised as a good, caring individual. Outfitted with religious collar and ecclesiastical vestments, wielding the symbols of authority, and with the cloak of moral superiority and righteousness, he was able to seduce, manipulate, and cajole an impressionable and trusting audience of adolescents.”

As another put it, referring to Wichman’s denial of the abuse, “I’m enormously disturbed by his lying. My disillusionment is monumental. Not because he was a pervert. But because of his lies. I couldn’t stand being around ministers or churches for ten years because I was so unglued by what a bunch of weak, dishonest liars so many of them are. Thanks, Dick.”

One of the young men who told their story to the task force was Clinton Huey, whose account was among the 12 printed anonymously in the report. Huey began participating in a Cameron House youth program as a high school junior in 1968. Coming from a difficult family situation, he was inspired by Wichman, who seemed to be the physically affectionate father figure he’d never had. After Huey chaired the annual Cameron House Carnival, Wichman invited him to spend the night at the Marin cabin alone with him and to share his bed.

Huey agreed, but when Wichman began touching him in a way that felt sexual, Huey asked him to stop, which he did. The next morning, the young man brought up what had happened the previous night, asking Wichman why he needed that kind of affection. Wichman answered: “I give so much of myself to the community. I need to get something back.”

The response left Huey with a profound sense of betrayal. “He was a representation of God in my life,” he explains. He wanted “something sexual back for giving to the community?” But Huey, who was 23 when this took place, decided, like so many others, to keep quiet about his experience, because he didn’t want to stir things up or jeopardize all the good that he still felt Cameron House did for the community.

The Reverend Bradford Woo, who participated in the task force and was also a victim, explains that Huey’s and many others’ long silence reflected, in part, traditional Chinese cultural values: respecting your elders, knowing your place, keep-

ing emotions and sexuality private. And it was those same values that gave Wichman, as an authority figure, an opportunity as a serial abuser. “These worked in his favor as he was grooming and scanning through these thousands of boys” who came through Cameron House, says Woo, who took part in the youth programs and later became a Cameron House staffer and an ordained minister. Parts of the Christian gospel also played into Wichman’s hands as he encouraged the boys to leave behind their families and follow both Wichman and Jesus.

Against the backdrop of the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s and ’70s, Wichman’s physical affection toward his young charges appeared open-minded and “American” to some of the boys, in contrast to the behavior of their own parents, who seemed old-fashioned and reserved. But Wichman, like many predators, paid special attention to fragile boys—those from broken families or who lived in situations where the father was absent in some way. There was a

SURVIVOR AND LEADER



REV. CALVIN CHINN

*“Anything associated
with Chinese
was not
good enough.”*

pattern to his predation: he would groom, or show favor to, boys who needed love and affection—and weren't protected by fathers.

One of those boys was Buddy Tate Choy, whose father had died when he was 7. At 13, he started receiving Wichman's attentions. After the first public stories of Wichman's abuse surfaced in late 1987 and early 1988, Choy started having nightmares. In a memory he recovered during that time, he recalled attending a large youth-congregation gathering or rally at Cameron House and being asked by Wichman to accompany him downstairs to a basement room known as the Log Cabin, whose wooden walls were hung with deer antlers. In the dark, Wichman said that "God would be closer to [Choy] if [he] did not have [his] clothes on."

Choy remembered Wichman's large hands on him and his sour, sweaty smell, like a locker room or sour milk. "I felt like I was going to vomit."

Wichman took the boy's penis in his hand. Choy could hear the gathering upstairs, as the kids sang hymns, and then Wichman praying. "Then I remember being back upstairs at the rally as if nothing had happened."

Wichman continued the abuse for four years, until Choy left for college. Both Choy and his wife, Jeanne Choy Tate, believe that the emotional damage the pastor caused has affected him and his family: Choy ended up a convicted felon for embezzling funds from a Chinatown community organization. His family became secondary victims. He attempted suicide and suffered from mood swings and bursts of rage. The family struggled financially for many years.

"It just took a great toll on us," Jeanne Choy Tate said.

Cameron House's leaders came to believe that these painful truths must be acknowledged before healing could begin. As the Healing Task Force encouraged people to share their stories, survivors like Choy began finding the courage and support to speak openly about their experiences. Both Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church formally acknowledged the abuse and apologized for Wichman's "broken trust and abuse of authority" in 2004; the San Francisco Presbytery formally apologized a year later, in 2005.

No criminal or civil suits were ever filed against Wichman, Cameron House, or the local or national Presbyterian Church despite Wichman's decades of abuse and the institutional failure to stop it. But some victims did want compensation. In 2004, the national church provided \$247,500 in funds for therapy and retreats for victims and their families—a group of several dozen people at that point.

That sum was about a quarter of what some members of the task force had originally requested and far less than what might have been paid out if victims had brought civil suits against Cameron House or the national Presbyterian Church. Their acknowledgment of Wichman's abuse, however, stands in contrast to the Catholic Church's well-documented history of transferring priests to other parishes to dodge liability for sex abuse.

Therapy sessions played a key role in Cameron House's healing. Starting in about 2003, Satsuki Ina became the main therapist treating Wichman's victims. Paid from church funds until that money ran

out, she continued to work with the survivors and their families for almost a decade. She came to know their stories intimately.

Noël Chun helped form the survivors group at Cameron House, which initially met at his home. He also underwent weekly two-hour individual therapy sessions with Ina for 10 years—initially driving from San Francisco to Sacramento to meet with her. Having struggled with suicidal thoughts, he credits Ina with saving his life.

By 2007, both Ina and San Francisco Presbytery head Palmer realized that for healing to take place, they needed to confront Wichman with the stories of abuse in person, instead of only through emails and letters, which Wichman had stopped responding to. Survivors told the therapist that they wanted acknowledgment from Wichman of the harm he'd done to them. Palmer and Ina hoped that in a face-to-face meeting Wichman would take responsibility for his decades of abuse and apologize to the survivors.

SILENCE AND SHAME



**JEANNE CHOY TATE (LEFT)
AND BUDDY TATE CHOY**
*"I remember being back upstairs
at the rally as if nothing had
happened," Buddy Tate Choy says.*

By the time Ina visited Oregon on March 26, 2007, the therapist had spent three years working with Wichman's victims. Palmer, meanwhile, had been appointed interim executive of the organizationally troubled San Francisco Presbytery nine months earlier. Assigned as a troubleshooter by the national organization, he was the first church representative to attend a survivors meeting and, now, to personally meet with Wichman. Both felt tense as they prepared to confront a man who'd caused so much pain.

Wichman greeted them graciously and was animated, despite his physical frailty. Once they reached his apartment, he led them to the picture window. "It's hard to decide whether to look east or west," he said, perhaps trying to charm them. But he then asserted, "I renounced and am no longer part of the church. I don't understand why you are here."

Palmer explained, "I was brought in to help the Presbytery move forward. The effect of your abuse on the entire Presbytery and its efforts towards healing..."

"You mean you think I caused the problems of the Presbytery?" Wichman asked, adding that although he'd been sent to see a psychiatrist after the church's 1987 investigation, the doctor had "said there was nothing wrong with me."

Wichman continued to maintain that he didn't know what he was accused of or who was saying such things about him.

The therapist listened to the exchange between the two men. "I was very aware of how powerfully seductive he could be," says Ina, recalling his apparent incredulity at being confronted with the accusations. She was also struck by how articulate Wichman was, displaying an ability to remember details from more than half a century earlier about Cameron House life, including details about so many of the boys and their family situations.

Wichman was well prepared for their visit. His daughter, who lived in California, telephoned him during their meeting to check on how it was going. Ina sensed that Wichman's daughter had advised him beforehand not only about where to seat the guests but also about not admitting to any wrongdoing. Wichman's son, John F. Wichman, who is a Presbyterian minister in the Bay Area, declined to comment for this story. "I am uncomfortable about being interviewed about my father," he wrote in an email.

Ina shared with Wichman the stories she'd heard from the

members of the Cameron House survivors group—about the skinny-dipping at night; his asking the boys at the cabin, “Who gets to share my bed?”; and the numerous instances of Wichman’s full-body bear hug in which the boys could feel the pastor’s erection beneath his trousers.

Wichman batted off the stories. He answered in a way that implicitly acknowledged their truth but downplayed their importance. He also reshaped them so that he would appear in a more flattering light. “Chinese people are so uptight,” Ina recalls him telling them. “Their parents don’t have an understanding of healthy sexuality.... I wanted these boys to experience freedom.”

The former pastor repeatedly reframed the stories to minimize any wrongdoing on his part, Palmer recalls. A typical response was “No, it didn’t happen like that. Yes, we went to the cabin, and we slept together, but I never penetrated anyone. That is something I would never do. I would rub up against him, and my penis would get hard, but there was never any penetration.”

The therapist also shared one survivor’s account of Wichman tapping him on the shoulder during a youth gathering as a signal to follow him into a private area. The boy then performed oral sex on the minister, after which Wichman asked him to kneel and pray. He then sent the boy back to the gathering.

Ina pointed out to him that the victim was a prepubescent boy just entering his teens at the time. Wichman’s response to her many examples were similar: “He’s the one that wanted to be intimate”, or “that one, you know, really had a strong attachment to me.”

Wichman explained to his visitors that the boys wanted and needed his love and that he was helping them explore their identities.

After nearly two hours, as the view out the window darkened, Ina and Palmer realized that Wichman wouldn’t apologize. He seemed to have convinced himself that he hadn’t harmed anyone. “They loved me, and I was doing my job,” Ina recalls him explaining. “I don’t know why people would want to hurt me after all I’ve given to that community.”

Palmer felt numb with disbelief at Wichman’s words. He concluded the meeting, explaining that the church condemned Wichman’s behavior and believed that he had molested the boys and caused great harm to them and their families.

Wichman continued to wear a “flat-looking smile,” Ina recalls, and didn’t outwardly react to this denunciation from the church he’d devoted his life to.

Instead, he asked them, “Would you like to stay for dinner?” It was nearly 6:30 p.m.

Reeling from Wichman’s apparent disconnect from the stories they’d shared of his decades-long pattern of predatory pedophilia, they declined the invitation. They rode the elevator down to the ground floor, passed through the reception area filled with lilies and their sickly-sweet scent, and exited the building.

Palmer turned to Ina. It was early evening, and the dark sky was threatening rain.

“Do you feel like we’ve been sitting with pure evil?” Palmer asked.

Ina looked at him. “You know, I’m a Buddhist. So I don’t think about things like that,” she said. “But if I were a Christian, I would totally agree with you.”

Wichman died less than three months later, on June 19, 2007. He never expressed guilt or remorse for his actions—even shortly before his death, according to the Rogue Valley Manor chaplain at the time, who visited him the week before he died.

The victims of Wichman’s abuse never received a full or formal apology from him. Jeanne Choy Tate, a longtime member of the Healing Task Force, continues to press the local and national Presbyterian Church for change based on input from survivors of clergy abuse. She has kept a tally of 40 known Wichman victims. The task force’s 2019 report counted 18 known victims but acknowledged that the number was probably much higher—more than 40 and possibly as many as 100.

But while the unresolved history hung over Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown like a dark cloud for more than 30 years, it is finally starting to lift. Echoing its early history as a safe house, 920 Sacramento Street’s healing process began with a group of women.

Chan-Scherer, among others, felt that Donaldina Cameron, who’d worked selflessly for decades to protect vulnerable girls and young women, would have been “rolling in her grave” if she had learned of Wichman’s crimes. The pastor took the trust built up over decades by Cameron and the other women who founded and ran the home, and he used it, in part, to brazenly abuse boys.

Other faith communities have recently turned to Cameron House for guidance on how to grapple with the aftermath of clergy sex abuse, including, according to Ina, a Catholic community ministering to Japanese Canadians. After a quarter century, and countless therapy sessions, community meetings, reports, the trip to Oregon to confront Wichman, an art installation, and a documentary film about the experience, the Cameron House community has brought this history to light and begun to recover from it. “We’re not healed until we can talk about the good and the bad that Dick brought,” task force participant Reverend Woo says.

Noël Chun, who was among the first to stand up and publicly reveal that he had been a victim, stayed away from Cameron House for many years. But now he, among others, has started to return. He has become a financial supporter again, in part because he believes in the work the organization does through its social

services department. He has also reconnected with childhood friends.

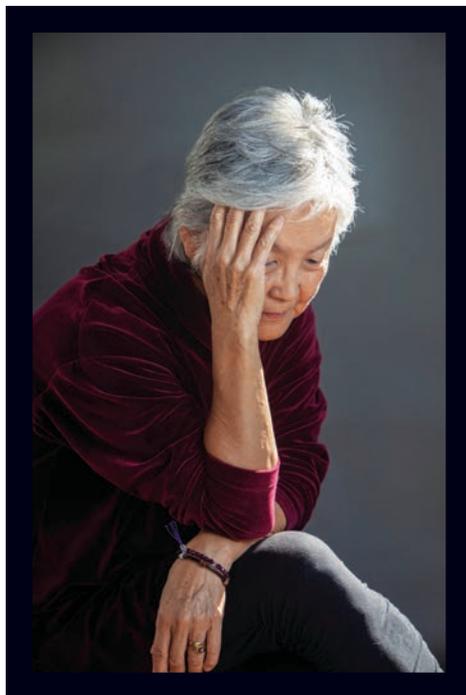
He wrote two poems, now displayed in Cameron House’s chapel, about the journey that he and other survivors have undertaken together. A passage from one of them reads:

*We have traveled for many years,
The Truth now spoken.
And no longer living with fear... ■*

Julia Flynn Siler is a New York Times bestselling author of three nonfiction books. Her most recent is The White Devil’s Daughters: The Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco’s Chinatown, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2019 and a finalist for a California Book Award.

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THE HEALER



SATSUKI INA

“I was very aware of how powerfully seductive [Wichman] could be,” describing her encounter with him as “chilling.”