

# Texas Girl Says Abuse Claims Were Coerced by Mom

**Cousins Jailed for Molestations She Now Claims Never Happened**

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Sixteen-year-old Stephanie Arena longs for a normal girl's life, but she is haunted by the fact that she sent her teenage cousins to prison for a crime she now says they didn't commit.

The sordid story began when Stephanie, just 7 years old at the time, was caught in a bitter custody battle between her parents, LaVonna and Stephan Arena. Worried that she'd lose her daughter, LaVonna took Stephanie and her brother from their home in Texas to a Florida homeless shelter. She then justified the abduction by telling social workers her kids were being molested.

Stephanie now says her mother used her as a tool to pry her family apart and to get her father to drop his custody claim.

"I am responsible for putting them in prison, and now that I am older and I can understand the consequences of my actions, I need to step up and do what I have to [to] make things right," she told "20/20" in an exclusive interview.

Her cousin John Arena, 17 at the time of the trial, was released on parole after serving five years of a seven-year sentence. Michael Arena, then 16 years old, is currently serving a 20-year sentence in a Texas prison.

## Trying to Make Things Right

Stephanie has been trying to "make things right" since she was 11, writing letters of apology to both brothers in prison.

But perhaps her bravest moment came when she went public with her story and returned to court, two years after accusing her cousins. She faced the same

judge and prosecutor and told them she had lied to them when she said her cousins molested her.



**Stephanie Arena's cousins went to prison after she accused them of molesting her as a child. Now, she says she was coerced by her mother into making false accusations and wants to help her cousins. (ABC News)**

She hoped her honesty would bring real justice to her family. Instead, she says, they treated her like a criminal.

She said they were "grilling me on whether I wanted to plead the fifth or not, and just really rude to me. I was like, 'Wait a second. You're a judge. You're supposed to serve justice. And now I'm telling you the truth, and you don't care.'"

In fact, Judge Edward Johnson of Bell County, Texas, warned Stephanie repeatedly that she could face felony prosecution for perjury and a possible 10-year prison sentence if she recanted her original charges. Johnson refused "20/20's" request for an interview.

Even at her young age, Stephanie refused to back

down and was willing — as the judge warned she might — to go to prison.

"I really do think that two-to-10 years is a small price to pay," she said.

### **Mother Now Spending Time With Convicted Pedophiles**

And perhaps this is the strangest twist in Stephanie's story. While her mom still maintains John and Michael molested her daughter, she allowed a twice-convicted pedophile to live with her and Stephanie. A judge found her mom's judgment so poor he awarded sole custody of Stephanie to her father, Stephan.

When "20/20" caught up with Stephanie's mom, she was living with a boyfriend in Muscatine, Iowa.

She spoke briefly with "20/20" on the street. She said the reports that she exposed her children to a sexual predator are inaccurate.

In her brief sidewalk interview she at first stood by her story that John and Michael Arena had molested her daughter. "I did not frame those boys and my children asked me to take them out of there. In fact, they begged me," she said.

It appears, however, that LaVonna's accusations are part of a troubling pattern. Police records and family testimony suggest that on three different occasions she has falsely accused other family members of abusing her kids, including a charge against Stephanie's father, Stephan Arena.

"I believe it was in 2000 she accused me and John and Michael again — while they were incarcerated," he said.

LaVonna Arena asked "20/20" not to use its sidewalk interview with her, suggesting a more formal interview later. She apparently decided against that and stopped taking "20/20's" phone calls. Her live-in boyfriend dropped a bombshell, however, explaining to "20/20" by phone that LaVonna would like to tell the truth and explain why she made Stephanie lie. But, her boyfriend said, "LaVonna is afraid she would go to jail."

Stephanie says it's that kind of attitude that leaves her bitter.

"When I realized she manipulated me, that was when I was like, I really don't care about you anymore. ... I can honestly say I hate her," she said.

### **Boys Need Lawyers or Intervention from Governor**

Stephanie's cousin John submits to an annual polygraph test administered by the state as part of his parole agreement.

Peter Heller, who recently conducted the test on John said he feels confident that John is truthful in saying he never had sexual contact with his cousin.

Heller said, "In my opinion he was truthful to the relevant questions. If I was to testify in court, my opinion would be that he did not molest Stephanie."

Despite Stephanie's assertion that she was not molested and other evidence that supports her claim, County Attorney Rick Miller wrote in a letter to "20/20" that "all of these matters were thoroughly vetted on appeal after appeal, and the evidence remained what it was: convincing."

Wrongful conviction expert Paul Ciolino, whose private investigative work has resulted in the release of dozens of death row inmates, says there is just one route for the Arena boys.

"Without a crew of high-priced lawyers, the governor's going to have to step in here and do the right thing. ... These are two kids who don't have resources& and no one's helping them," he said.

And young Stephanie Arena is a victim too, not of molestation, she says, but of guilt.

She says she thinks every day about the devious plots she says her mother masterminded. Her hope now is that somebody will step in and help her cousins.

"Just for somebody to care," she said. "Just for somebody to realize, 'Hey, what happened to those boys was wrong.'"