

Daughter of Yisrayl Hawkins responds to food stamp issue

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A daughter of Yisrayl Hawkins, whom he excommunicated from his religious sect, claims she routinely received members' food stamps as tithes while she and her husband were employed at the compound.

Margo Corneillie made a number of accusations against her father in response to a guest column, signed by sect member Jodie Beard, published last week in the Reporter-News.

In his notarized letter, Beard stated the sect "never" accepted food stamps for tithes. But Corneillie claims she received members' food stamps as tithes while she and her husband were employed at the compound.

"We often received tithes in the form of food stamps and we were told to write 'other' on the receipts rather than 'cash' or 'check,'" she said.

The food stamps were then given to Yisrayl Hawkins, she said.

"He never once turned them down or instructed us not to accept them," Corneillie said.

She and her husband worked in the sect's mail room for 2-1/2 years and dealt directly with funds that were mailed in, including food stamps, she said.

Corneillie also claimed that her father taught people how to get on welfare and instructed new mothers to write "father unknown" on their birth certificates, so the child could take the name "Hawkins" and so the mother could get a larger welfare check, one-third of which was tithed to the House of Yahweh.

On Tuesday the Reporter-News again requested an interview with Yisrayl Hawkins through a spokesman at the sect's headquarters on T&P Lane in Abilene. The spokesman said he would forward the request, the latest of many, to the sect's board of elders.

Officials who oversee welfare programs, including food stamps before they were replaced with the Lone Star Card, say it is illegal to use the stamps for anything other than the purchase of food.

Her accusations against her father are similar to ones made by other ex-members. They include the selling of wine at the compound without a license and operating a restaurant during feasts without a health permit. The food at the restaurant and stores was purchased with food stamps, she said, and sold for cash.

Following the publication of Beard's letter, several other ex-members came forward to say they, too, gave food stamps as tithes and were encouraged to do so by elders. They declined to let their names be used because they feared either prosecution by the state or reprisals from the sect.

One man provided a tape recording he'd made of a meeting with elders who chastised him from falling away from the House of Yahweh and called him a "thief" because he didn't pay tithes.

"I have to give you all my damn food stamps?" the man complains on the tape.

"You don't have to give it all," the elder says, "you just have to give 10 percent for Yahweh."

When the man protested it was illegal, the elder said he could convert the food stamps to food and give that as part of his tithe.

Although Corneillie's claims against her father are the same as those told by others, her story is more poignant.

"I used to call him 'Dad,'" she said.

That was before she noticed that her father's teachings began to change dramatically. When she and her husband started pointing out things they disagreed with, both were ex-communicated by formal letter.

"When you question it, you're labeled as a rebel," she said.

She said originally her father's teachings were pure. But something happened and he grew paranoid, corrupt and power hungry, she said.

"When Yisrayl started hungering for the power, the focus was taken off the Kingdom and placed on the man," Corneillie said. "His goal is to become a god."