

# Fallen from grace: Spiritual leader sentenced to prison for sexual assault

Shalom Baer Gee Apr 19, 2023 Updated Apr 24, 2023 08:34

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One half of a federal courtroom gallery in Rapid City rose from their seats in support of disgraced spiritual leader Donald Eric Cross, 46, as he walked into the tall, windowless room for his first sentencing appearance on April 7.

"All rise," he chuckled before sitting down for the first day of his two-part sentencing for abusive sexual contact, a charge that appeared to scratch the surface of his conduct, according to testimony and undisputed family history.



This Facebook photo shows Donald Eric Cross in May 2019, the same month he was indicted in federal court on sexual assault charges. Photo courtesy of Facebook.

Throughout the hearing — split between April 7 and Wednesday because of the number of people who wanted to take the stand — a picture of Cross the "medicine man," the "spiritual leader," and the "predator" began to emerge through a mist of tears and undying support.

Cross was a spiritual leader on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation who led sweat, sundances, and other traditional Lakota spiritual ceremonies on the reservation and in New Mexico. He also offered spiritual guidance, according to multiple people's testimony.

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His brother, Lawrence Cross, said "he was a great spiritual person for me."

A man who travelled from New Mexico to speak on behalf of Cross said he knew him since he was a child and witnessed 20 years of Cross' work. He said he saw marriages fixed, people stop drinking and "countless people brought closer to God."

"The fall from grace has been punishment enough," he said.

The fall began in 2009 with two teenage girls seeking spiritual guidance. It ended on Wednesday when U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Viken sentenced Cross to 10 years in federal prison and 10 years of supervised release for abusive sexual contact, the maximum sentence.

On Nov. 28, 2009, the two girls — 16 and 17 at the time — went to Cross' house in the Kyle area.

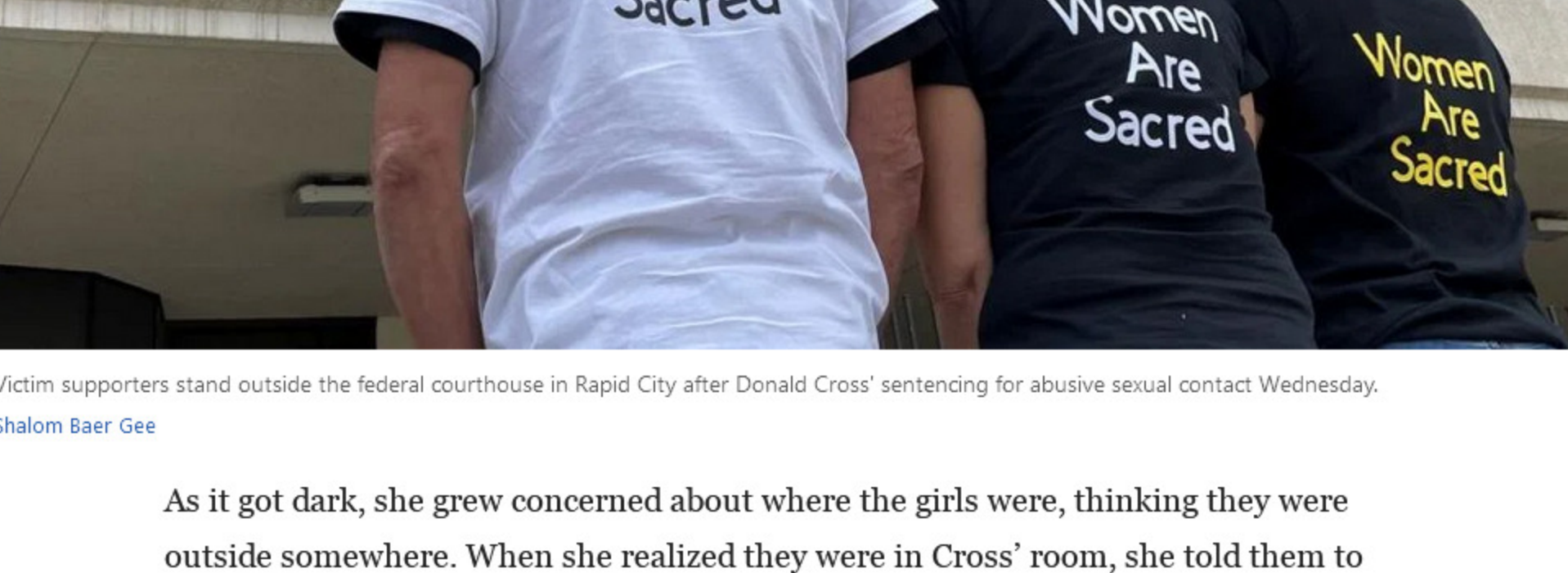
The 17-year-old girl, now an adult, testified through a video conference that she and her friend went to Cross' house for spiritual guidance. As the evening went on, Cross got alcohol from a shed. The girl said it was the first time she had ever drank.

"I felt warm," she said.

She and her friend went to Cross' room. He gave them clothes to sleep in, and they began to watch TV.

"(He) climbed on top of me and did his thing," she said. "I was really scared."

Joann "Uma" Wilkinson, who is the 16-year-old's grandmother, testified she was at the house at the time, and the plan was for the girls to sleep in a room with her.



Women supporters stand outside the federal courthouse in Rapid City after Donald Cross' sentencing for abusive sexual contact Wednesday. Shalom Baer Gee

As it got dark, she grew concerned about where the girls were, thinking they were outside somewhere. When she realized they were in Cross' room, she told them to come out. Cross answered, "Stay out of it, Uma. They're gonna stay in here."

Wilkinson fell asleep on the couch and woke up when the 17-year-old "jumped" into her arms saying, "Help me. Help me. I'm scared. I'm scared of him. I'm scared of Eric."

After getting both girls into a different bedroom, Wilkinson asked them what happened, and they wouldn't answer. The next morning, she took the girls on a long walk outside of the house, and they told her Cross had raped them.

One of the girls' mother's picked them up, and they went to Indian Health Services for "rape kits", a process in which physical evidence is gathered. In a few years, the tribal case was dropped.

In 2018, everything took a turn when a Facebook post from one of Cross' ex-wives surfaced and caught the attention of the FBI. Special Agent Chris Reinke testified he read a post by Charlotte Two Eagle about alleged abuse. Two Eagle had been married to Cross.

The FBI then reopened the case.

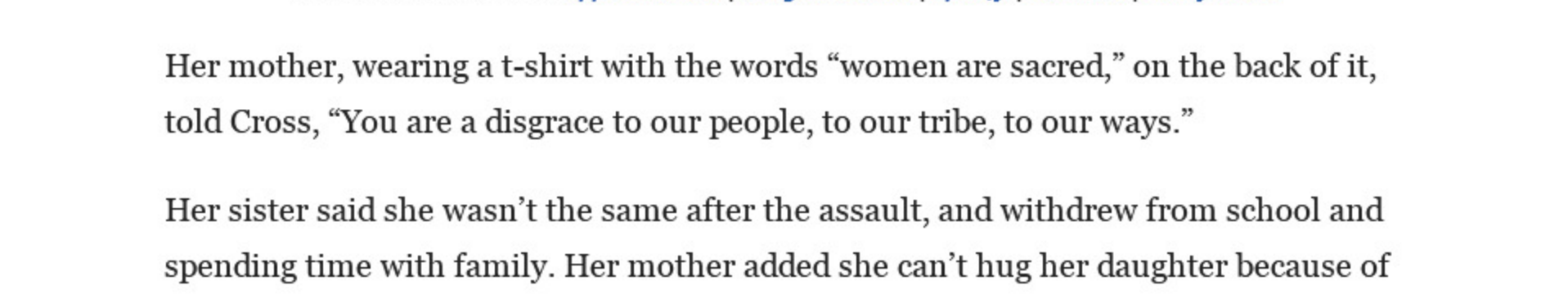
The rape kits were retested, Assistant U.S. Attorney Megan Poppen said, and Cross matched. On May 21, 2019, a federal grand jury indicted Cross on two counts of sexual abuse for the November 2009 incidents. The indictment added aggravated sexual abuse for the alleged rape of a different 16-year-old girl in June 2012.



Charlotte Two Eagle, left, and Lynette Adams, right, stand outside the federal courthouse in Rapid City on Wednesday after Donald Eric Cross' sentencing for abusive sexual contact. The FBI investigated the case after Two Eagle made a Facebook post about Cross. Cross was also charged with allegedly raping Adams in 2016, but the charge was dropped as part of a plea deal. Adams said Two Eagle encouraged her to testify at Cross' sentencing. Shalom Baer Gee

Reinke testified he discovered the 2012 allegation during his investigation. He said Cross went to the girl's parents' house to help her prepare for a sundance ceremony. When the parents left the house for something, Cross took her to the bathroom and raped her.

She didn't tell anyone in the family for four years, according to testimony from her parents and sisters.



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Her mother, wearing a t-shirt with the words "women are sacred," on the back of it, told Cross, "You are a disgrace to our people, to our tribe, to our ways."

Her sister said she wasn't the same after the assault, and withdrew from school and spending time with family. Her mother added she can't hug her daughter because of how traumatized she is.

"I came to Eric because he was a relative, and I asked him to help me, but he fooled me. I was too trusting," her father said. "I was taught that as a spiritual man, you are accountable to the people. You are only as good as you walk."

Lynette Adams, 46, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, also went to Cross for help. She ended up as the fourth person added to the indictment in the case. In July 2019, the government added a count to their indictment against Cross regarding Adams alleged sexual abuse in 2016.

Adams spoke with the Journal after the sentencing and wanted her name in this story.

When Cross pleaded guilty to abusive sexual contact against the 17-year-old girl, the government agreed to drop the charges for the alleged assault on Adams and the two 16-year-old girls.



Lynette Adams stands outside the federal courthouse in Rapid City on Wednesday after Donald Eric Cross was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison for abusive sexual contact. Shalom Baer Gee

Adams' whole body shook as she cried through her testimony Wednesday. She told the courtroom she decided to come forward with her experience when she learned about the allegations against Cross, especially since they included minors.

She met Cross in Montana at a sundance through another spiritual leader, who invited Cross into their "ceremony circle" in 2012, Adams said.

In 2014, that spiritual leader sexually assaulted a close relative of Adams, leaving her "devastated." She testified she reached out to Cross "seeking some kind of healing and grounding in my spiritual faith which had been destroyed by another spiritual leader."

After communicating for about a year and half, Adams was on a visit to the Black Hills with a friend. She said Cross told her he had suffered a cardiac event, so she bought sweetgrass and some other items in Rapid City and brought them to Cross on the reservation.

After she arrived, they ended up helping a family prepare for a sundance and then visited Cross' sundance grounds. When they got back to Cross' house around midnight, Adams said she was exhausted, both physically and mentally.

He offered for her to stay the night rather than drive to Sturgis, where she was staying.

"The rape I experienced was very aggressive and violent in nature," she told the judge. "I used all my strength I had to resist and begged him repeatedly to stop, until I was physically exhausted."

Adams said she sustained bruising on her arms, wrists and thighs. Immediately after, as the sun was "just coming up," she went into the bathroom and dry heaved before getting in the shower and using "every soap and conditioner."

"I wanted him off of my body," she said.

Adams asked the judge to sentence Cross to the maximum.

"I would like to think we live in a society that knows sexual violence is not to be tolerated," she said.

Cross spoke at length at his sentencing. He first spoke in Lakota before switching to English. He apologized to the court, the judge, the U.S. Marshals Service, the public defender's office, and the prosecution.

"I admit my guile. I admit my shortcomings," he said. "My sins, my earthly attachments made me do bad things."

Cross didn't ask for leniency.

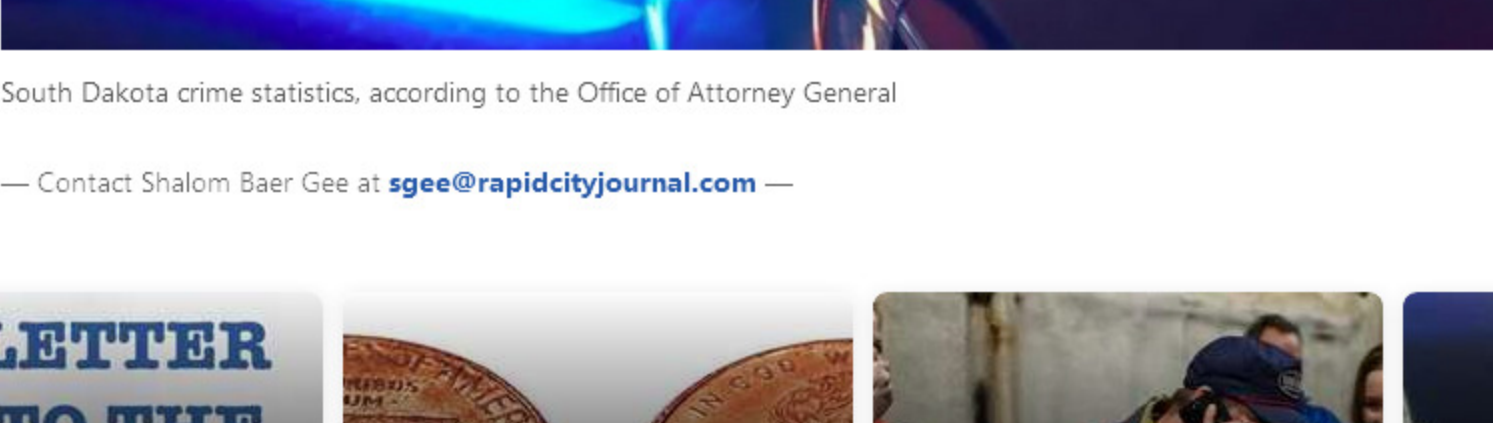
"I won't ask for forgiveness because I know I will not be forgiven. I will die with these choosings," he said. "I cannot say I'm sorry enough for all of it."

Viken told Cross he could have easily seen a 20- to 30-year sentence, and the only reason he got a 10-year sentence was because of the limits Congress placed on federal judges.

"You haven't just fallen from grace," Viken said, noting the damage to the victims in the case and "the victims whose names we may not know."

As Cross left the courtroom, he told his daughters to keep going and said, "I love you all, even though you might not like it. You're all still my relatives."

Cross' case highlights the staggering statistic that 56% of Native American women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, according to a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study.



South Dakota crime statistics, according to the Office of Attorney General

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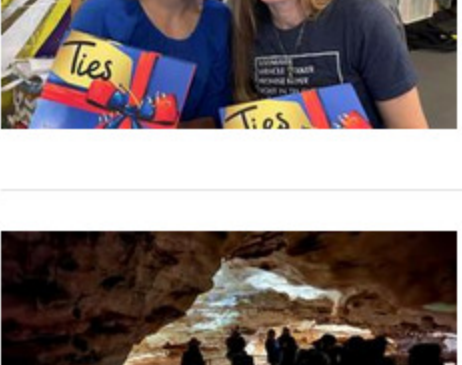
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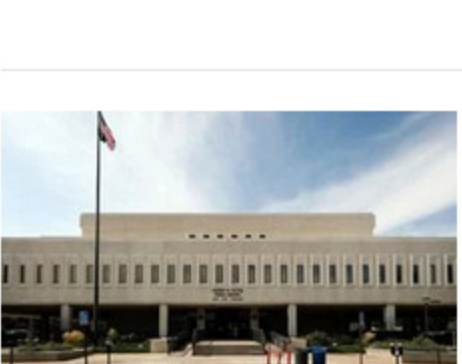
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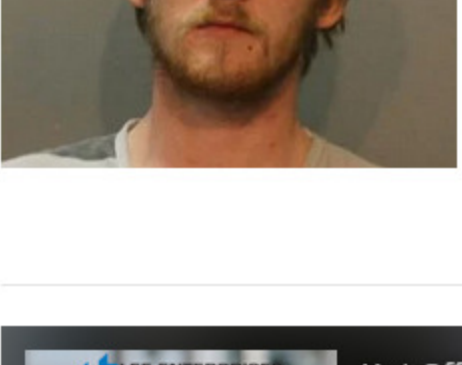
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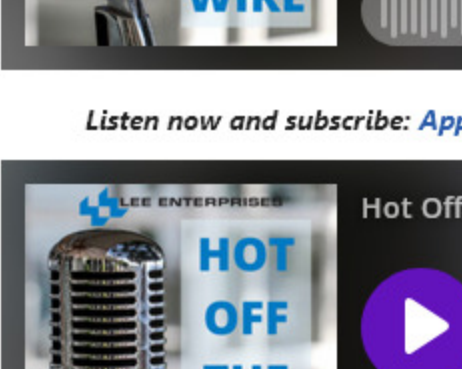
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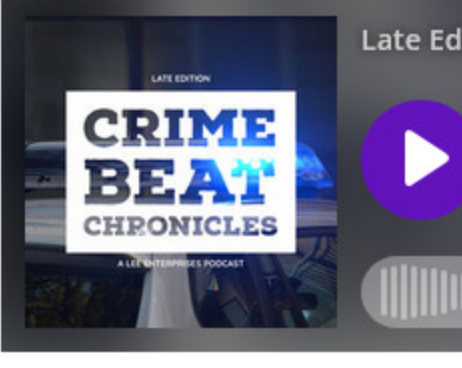
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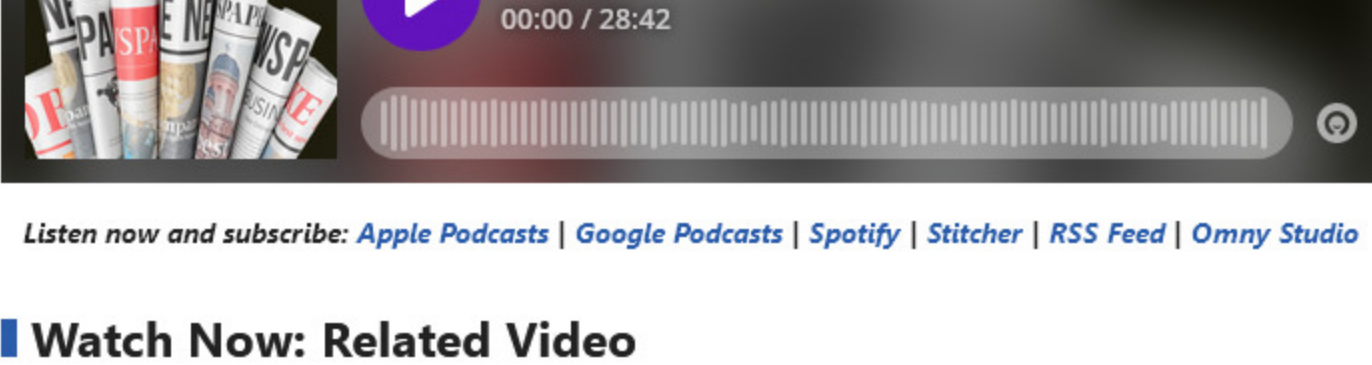
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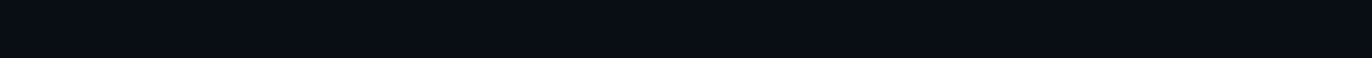


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