

SUNDAY Middlesex News

BER 29

SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 1997

68 PAGES • ONE DOL

Page One

A place to turn

Support group helps those who say clergy abused them

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Whenever a priest comes within 15 feet of him, Myles begins to shake, his heartbeat races and he gets a "wicked" nervous feeling.

He's experienced these involuntary reactions since 1975, when, he says, a local priest — a man his mother hoped would be a father figure — molested him.

"To this day, I won't go near a confession box," said Myles, a 35-year-old Framingham Catholic who asked his last name not be used.

"It's hard for me to get close to a priest. I want to stay with the Catholic church, and someday I plan on getting married, but I can't get married with a priest."



Phil Saviano

He never told his mother about the abuse.

But for Myles and others who share his experience, there is a new place to turn.

The New England chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests was organized this spring to bring victims together to discuss — and, organizers hope, lighten — the burden carried by victims of abuse by the clergy. The group is planning a third meeting in Natick.

"I think any child who is brought into sexual activity with an adult is going to have a number done on them," said Phil Saviano of Boston, organizer of the local chapter.

SNAP was founded seven years ago in the Chicago area and numbers about 3,000 members nationally, according to national director David
GROUP, PAGE 5A

Group a place to turn for victims

GROUP, FROM 1A

Clohessy. All faiths can join, though most members are Catholic.

The exact number of abuse victims nationwide is unknown. The Rev. Andrew Greeley, a Chicago priest, author and sociologist, estimated in 1993 that 2,000 to 4,000 Roman Catholic clergymen in the U.S. had abused up to 100,000 victims. Greeley extrapolated that figure from a report on clergy abuse issued by the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Saviano first contacted SNAP for advice while suing the Worcester diocese over alleged molestation by an East Douglas priest in the '60s. Saviano settled with the diocese last May; the priest is now serving a 275-year sentence for molesting children in New Mexico.

"I had no understanding of the legal system and no understanding of how childhood sexual assault can affect a person as an adult," Saviano said. "David Clohessy was very, very

helpful ... I realized there was something I could do besides feel frustrated and angry."

Those abused by clergy say they suffer low self-esteem, problems accepting authority and trouble maintaining trusting relationships.

Saviano went public with his story and his plans to start a Boston-area chapter of SNAP. The group held an organizational meeting in Needham in April, has also met in Worcester and launched a confidential mailing list reaching more than 140 people.

Victims of sexual abuse by clergy members say they suffer some of the same problems as other victims — low self-esteem, problems accepting authority and trouble maintaining intimate, trusting relationships.

But SNAP members say they suffer an additional level of pain because the abuse shattered their religious faith. Many said they could not come forward because they felt the community would side with the priest.

"You're not scared when a priest does it," said Myles, a devout Catholic who took his first Communion from the late Richard Cardinal Cushing. "You're stunned. Your faith just hits you in the face."

"There are particular psychological and emotional overtones ... that are very difficult for people who have not experienced it to really understand," added a 51-year-old Acton woman who was molested in Protestant churches in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. "Some find they cannot retrieve any kind of meaning-

ful spirituality."

Retribution against their assailants is impossible for many victims, like Myles, who find the statute of limitations has expired. In other cases, like the Acton woman's Pennsylvania incident, the abuser is dead.

Some members credit psychiatric therapy with helping to ease the pain. But they said talks with fellow victims — held in secret meetings closed to the public — add a dimension that cannot be found in one-on-one sessions.

"I don't need SNAP as a therapy group," the Acton woman said. "The value for me is to really be open about these things and receive support from others with similar circumstances."

Some SNAP members remain devout churchgoers. But members' criticism of the Catholic Church's handling of their complaints has brought the group into conflict with the church.

In its policy on sexual abuse allegations, the Archdiocese of Boston promises to provide counseling to victims and launch a prompt investigation. Priests who confess to abuse or who face solid evidence can be assigned to a treatment program, reassigned to a monitored situation or invited to resign.

Myles and Saviano — whose church was located outside the Boston archdiocese — said they were dissatisfied with their churches' responses to their complaints. Myles said he was surprised to hear the priest who molested him in 1975 was still in the pulpit almost 20 years later.

"They kept moving him from church to church," said Myles, whose alleged assailant faces

charges from other victims. "That's what really makes me angry about the Catholic Church."

Archdiocese spokesman John Walsh said he couldn't discuss individual cases, but said the policy has generally received favorable public response.

Walsh said the church may have mishandled cases in the past and expresses "deep sorrow" for anyone hurt. He said officials at the archdiocese believe the current policy is effective, though it is still open for review.

"I say this with the utmost respect, even for those who take an adversarial position, but I doubt we'll ever be able to satisfy everybody," he said. "SNAP, I think, constitutionally takes an adversarial position toward the church. That's their right."

The fledgling New England chapter may create further controversy in the political arena.

Saviano hopes to create a political presence for the group, backing bills that require clergymen to report abuse to civil authorities. Clergy members are not required to do so under state law, though teachers, doctors and other professionals are.

"I would like to have a little bit of a lobbying aspect, as well," he said.

Others don't share Saviano's eagerness. Myles compared the political role to "a union breaker ... lost children of the church attacking the church we have today."

"I still love being a Catholic," he added.

Anyone interested in joining the group or the confidential mailing list can call Saviano at (617) 983-5075.

"It's been very helpful for me," Myles said. "They probably can do a lot more for me. It's the early stages for me."