

Obituaries

Journalist Kathy Shaw, tireless tracker of clergy sex abuse in blog

By J.M. Lawrence
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Journalist Kathy Shaw spent each day for more than 15 years obsessively culling tens of thousands of news stories about the clergy sex abuse scandal for the online archive Abuse Tracker.

The work began as a volunteer effort during the last years of her long career at the Worcester Telegram & Gazette and evolved into the primary focus of her life. With her dog nearby, and a pot of coffee handy, Ms. Shaw scrolled for hours at her computer and forged friendships with survivors.

She became a hero to many who found comfort when they learned from Abuse Tracker that they were not alone. "She saved lives," said Skip Shea, who first met Ms. Shaw when she interviewed him for the T&G about the Worcester priest who had abused him.

Ms. Shaw, who lived in Barre, died Sunday in Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester from complications of pneumonia. She was 72.

"A lot of my courage came from Kathy," said Shea, a filmmaker whose latest film, "Trinity," portrays his trauma in a bookstore when the priest who abused him approached smiling and offering help as a clerk. The priest eventually was defrocked and died in prison while serving a sentence for abuse in Texas.

Ms. Shaw, who studied counseling and also worked as a crisis counselor while reporting for the newspaper, approached survivors in a way that set her apart from other

journalists, said Phil Saviano, who launched Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, an organization known as SNAP. Saviano also was portrayed in the Academy Award-winning film "Spotlight."

Saviano said Ms. Shaw was one of the first reporters he spoke with in the early 1990s. Somehow, he said, she managed to infuse their conversations with levity amid the pain. "She had a good sense of humor. She could lighten things up," Saviano added.

"Many of the survivors came to think of her as our godmother," he said. "She came to SNAP conferences. She welcomed an opportunity to meet some of the people in the stories she had on her tracker."

The blog now called Abuse Tracker was first launched in 2002 by Bill Mitchell of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Ms. Shaw began following it and sending Mitchell her latest reporting for the T&G.

In the late 1960s, she began her news career at the paper under the byline Kathleen A. Shaw.

Ms. Shaw gradually took over the tracking work of Abuse Tracker, and the blog moved to the website of the National Catholic Reporter, an independent newspaper. In 2006, BishopAccountability.org began hosting Abuse Tracker and started paying Ms. Shaw a modest fee.

Ms. Shaw could not be coaxed into stepping away from her work for holidays or a vacation. "She had that reporter's verve and zest for the story. She thought of it as a way of

life, not as a job," said Terence McKiernan, president of BishopAccountability.org.

"It was not the work of an embittered person, or someone hostile to religion, but someone who was genuinely curious and interested," McKiernan said, adding that "she left quite a legacy and it's up to us to continue it."

"She was such a grounded, loving person," said Vicki Polin, who became friends with Ms. Shaw while Polin operated another tracking blog called The Awareness Center, which was focused on sexual abuse in Jewish communities.

Followers of Abuse Tracker posted messages of appreciation on Ms. Shaw's Facebook page upon news of her death. One survivor credited Ms. Shaw with encouraging her to write a book, while others recalled the courage she showed while tracking a pedophile priest to Canada for a story in the T&G.

Ms. Shaw also was a union organizer at the newspaper. She retired in 2006.

Dianne Williamson, a former T&G colleague who left the paper this year after 35 years, said Ms. Shaw was a bulldog reporter devoted to exposing clergy sex abuse.

"She was a passionate advocate for the victims and was devoted to sharing their stories and providing them a forum," Williamson said. "For her, it wasn't just a job. She really cared about the victims on an emotional level, but she never let that get in the way of her reporting."

Ms. Shaw grew up in Athol and was raised Catholic. Her



HUGH WALSH

Ms. Shaw was a reporter at the Worcester Telegram & Gazette for decades.

father, Alexander Shaw Jr., was a foreman at the Union Twist Drill Co. Her mother, Evelyn, whose last name was Burwood before marrying, was a homemaker.

As a young girl, Ms. Shaw was "very independent" and often clashed with their father, said her oldest sister, Jean Codding of Zephyrhills, Fla., who is her only surviving sibling.

Their father wanted his son to attend college, but not Kathy. "Our father said she was a girl and didn't need to go," Jean said. Ms. Shaw made her way to college no matter. She graduated from Becker College and Assumption College, both in Worcester, and never mar-

ried.

Burial will be private for Ms. Shaw, who was beloved by many nieces and nephews, her sister said.

Ms. Shaw donned a Santa Claus suit to entertain them on Christmas when they were young, and regaled her extended family with her storytelling skills accompanied by "boisterous laughter."

According to her family, her stories usually began, "Oh you're not gonna believe what I found out."

In a video interview recorded for BishopAccountability.org, Ms. Shaw described the allure of waking up in the middle of the night to check for

news coming in from Australia and Europe. "There's that sense of the old reporter in me," she said. "It's like, 'What's out there today?'"

She believed the thousands of stories she posted on Abuse Tracker had an important role to play.

"Years down the road, where the churches pretend there never was a problem because people were making it up," Ms. Shaw said, "there is this massive archive now where people can go in there and say, 'Oh no — no, no, no, no.'"

J.M. Lawrence can be reached at jmlawrence@me.com.