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NEWS

Long list of sex abuse cases at local Catholic schools

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On Tuesday, officials at McQuaid Jesuit high school acknowledged credible claims that seven former staff members had sexually abused minors, including some McQuaid students. The revelations came as part of an announcement by the Jesuit's Northeast Province, following similar disclosures across the United States.

What remains unclear, however, is whether the groups that operate other local Catholic schools have ever undertaken an accounting of abuse accusations similar to that of the Jesuits.

The Sisters of Mercy, the order that operates Mercy High School, and the Congregation of Christian Brothers, which operates Bishop Kearney, have been caught up in abuse scandals in Ireland, where both are based. There has been relatively little information released publicly about abuse allegations in this country.

Aquinas, formerly run under the auspices of the Rochester diocese, is now operated by a lay board of trustees.

It is clear, however, that none of those schools have been immune from allegations of sexual misconduct by their staff members.

One high-profile case arose in 1992, when a teacher and drama coach at Bishop Kearney High School was accused of sexually abusing and threatening a female student beginning in the late 1960s. The teacher, Brother John Heathwood, was part of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, whose members are not priests but take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The accusations against Brother John Heathwood were detailed and explicit, but the statute of limitations barred any criminal prosecution and led to the dismissal of a lawsuit filed by

the former student against Heathwood, his congregation, the school and the Diocese of Rochester.

Brother John D. Walsh, vice principal at the now-closed Cardinal Mooney High School in Greece, was arrested in 1985 and charged with kidnapping two adolescent boys from a downtown Rochester street and offering them money for sex. The boys, 11 and 12 years old, were released unharmed.

Walsh was not an ordained priest but a Franciscan Brother of the Holy Cross and had taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

He pleaded guilty to coercion and unlawful imprisonment and was sentenced to six months in jail.

A former Bishop Kearney teacher and basketball coach, Brother John Walderman, was arrested in 1985 in Rhode Island, when he was principal of a high school, and accused of offering an underage boy money for sex. The case was later dismissed, according to news reports.

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A 57-year-old male teacher at Our Lady of Mercy High School was arrested in May 2000 after it was learned he had had a physical relationship with a 13-year-old student at the all-girls school.

The teacher, Alexander Capo, pleaded guilty to two separate counts of endangering the welfare of a child, a misdemeanor, and was given two 30-day jail sentences.

A priest who worked at Mercy at one point was placed on leave by the Rochester diocese in 2011 after a credible accusation that he had sexually abused a minor in the late 1960s. The diocese did not say where the Rev. Vincent Panepinto was working when the abuse occurred or when he was at Mercy.

The principal of Aquinas Institute, the Rev. John H. Menner, was removed from the post after being arrested on a charge of patronizing a prostitute in 1979. A judge later said he would dismiss the charge if the priest avoided further trouble with the law.

A former lay teacher at Aquinas was accused of sexually abusing and harassing an employee at the Rochester school in 1993. That allegation came to light the following year when the teacher, Brian C. Buff, was arrested for sexually abusing two boys from a school in Troy where he had worked.

He pleaded guilty to sodomy in 1994 and was sentenced to three to nine years in state prison.

An assistant principal at Aquinas was charged in 1998 with sexually abusing a boy who was not a student at the school. Stephen M. Ward, who also had been a teacher at the school for 20 years, pleaded guilty to sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child.

Irondequoit Police Chief Richard Tantalo said his department has not had anyone come forward with allegations of past abuse related to Bishop Kearney in the six years since he's been chief. But he encourages any victim to come forward, even if the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution has passed.

"From a healing perspective, we have the opportunity to intervene with some resources and referrals to appropriate advocacy agencies," Tantalo said. "And the information that victims share could be important to another law enforcement agency or another case. They should never make the assumption that it's too late to come forward."

Of course, allegations of teachers sexually abusing students is not unique to private schools. Nearly every school district in Monroe County has wrestled with such allegations over the last decade. Some of the most notable cases include:

Brockport kindergarten teacher Roland Yockel II pleaded guilty to child pornography charges in 2018 and admitted stealing underwear from children in a Hamlin recreation program.

Penfield teacher Eric Brewer admitted giving a student alcohol and having sex with them in 2017.

Terrance Hocter, a teacher at Webster's State Road Elementary School, admitted secretly recording female students while they changed in the school restroom.

Christina Jewell-Belluccio, a cheer coach at Greece Olympia High School, pleaded guilty in 2015 to third-degree rape as a result of her sexual encounters with a 16-year-old student who attended the school.

Jennifer Kennard, a teacher's aide in East Irondequoit, was convicted of rape after having sex with a 13-year-old student at a Greece hotel in 2013.

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