

Accuser Of Notorious Molester Carries On

After Bringing A Priest To Justice, Man Finds Network For Other Survivors

By JANET KERLIN
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CRANSTON, R.I. — Frank Fitzpatrick, fingernails bitten down hard, closed his eyes, put his hands over his face and massaged his temples as he described his boyhood rape by a Roman Catholic priest, and how his public accusation led 130 others to make similar charges.

The 45-year-old insurance adjuster and private investigator from Cranston eventually brought down one of the country's most notorious child molesters — the Rev. James Porter, who abused children in seven states.

Fitzpatrick's crusade prompted a flood of calls from other abuse survivors who wanted to help or be helped. That led Fitzpatrick and his wife, Sara, to form a support network that has grown to 2,500 people linked by phone, fax and newsletter.

"The reason why I (pursued) my perpetrator was so it didn't happen to anyone else, so that's still why I do it," said Fitzpatrick, a short, stocky man with a brown beard.

Survivor Connections has attracted calls and letters from people in all 50 states and as far away as Australia and South Africa.

Some call for emotional support or to receive The Survivor Activist newsletter, published on a personal computer in what used to be a family room for the Fitzpatricks' two sons, ages 8 and 15.

Others seek help prosecuting their abusers. Among their success stories is a Brown University professor who, with the Fitzpatricks' help, used public records and a tape recorder to track down and win a civil judgment against the choir director who molested him as a boy.

Ross Cheit, a political science professor, said he admires Fitzpatrick and drew inspiration from him.

"I took strength from the fact that, my God, Frank took on the Catholic church. The church has such respectability and such resources," he said.

Survivor Connections is nonprofit and part-time for the Fitzpatricks, though it's hard to tell from the dozens of hours they spend on it each week.

"I think what's helping him with his pain is helping others," said Genevieve Brosnahan of Warwick, who has been provided emotional support by Fitzpatrick to deal with her childhood abuse by a male relative.

Fitzpatrick agrees that running Survivor Connections helps him.

"It's rewarding to me, because it's something important," he said.

When Fitzpatrick was a child he was overpowered by Porter, but as a 39-year-old man Fitzpatrick triumphed, starting the chain of events that led to Porter's sentencing on Dec. 6, 1993.

After Fitzpatrick publicly named Porter as the man who gave him drug-laced mincemeat pie and raped him, men and women came forward and said the priest also had molested them, in parishes where he had been transferred by church officials who knew of his "problem with boys."

"A prolific, sick individual" Fitzpatrick says of Porter.

From grabbing genitals and pressing against clothed bodies of boys and girls from behind, to forcing himself on top of them and raping them, Porter by his own admission assaulted up to 100 children.

"He was supposed to take me to a ball game. He took me to a house, I believe it was his parents' (in Revere, Mass.)," Fitzpatrick said.

Porter gave him a piece of pie and insisted that he finish it. Fitzpatrick became dizzy and had to lay down. When Fitzpatrick regained consciousness, Porter was on top of him, raping him.

While Porter is serving time in a Greenfield, Mass., prison, Fitzpatrick continues his crusade to help other sexual abuse victims.

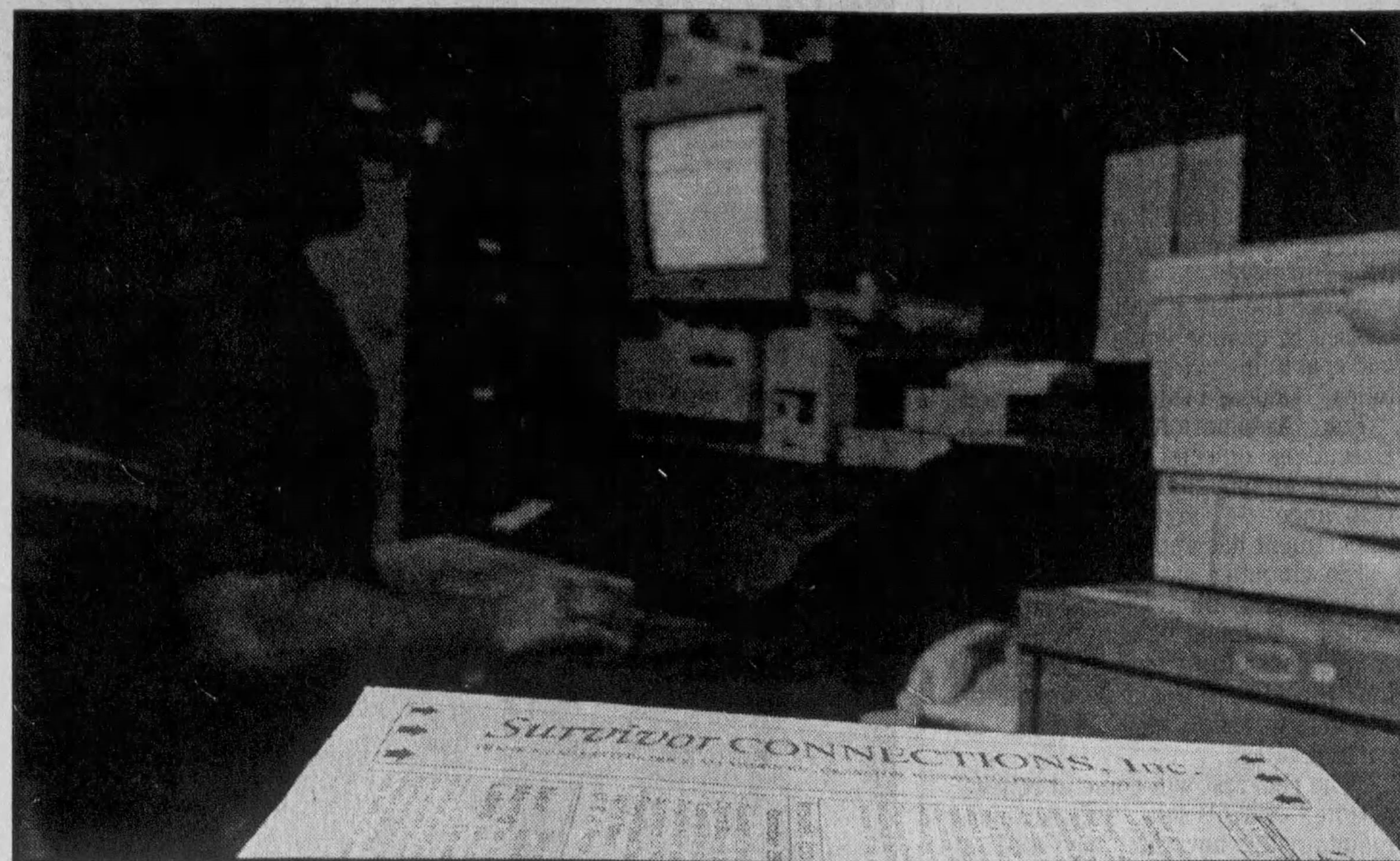
On any given day, he and his wife — who says she was sexually abused as a child by other children — receive a dozen calls. Mrs. Fitzpatrick may spend 45 minutes on the phone with a first-time caller who is relieved to find "somebody else in the world who understands."

"There needs to be a Survivor Connections everywhere," she said.

Estimates vary widely of what percentage of adults were molested as children. In 1993, there were 140,000 reports of sexual abuse to state child protective services across the country.

The impact on victims ranges from people who live normal lives to those who are more likely to commit crimes or be victims of crime, or to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, said Richard Gelles, director of the Family Violence Research Center at the University of Rhode Island.

When victims call Survivor Connections, "They want to know that they're feelings are not different



AP

Frank Fitzpatrick edits an issue of *Survivor Connection* at his home in Cranston, R.I. earlier this month.

from everybody else's," Fitzpatrick said.

"Everybody has the same fear, shame, emotions and hurt," he said. "A lot of people call who haven't told anybody before. They haven't told their spouse or parents yet."

Fitzpatrick said he was traumatized by his attack at age 12 and repressed the memory until he was 39 and began to question the source of an overwhelming grief.

"It's hard to explain, but deep inside me I always felt a great pain," he said.

The blocked memories came back after he began to ask questions.

"I was in my upstairs bedroom. I asked 'Why do I still feel so bad? I've got a good job, a nice family, a wife who loves me. I decided something was wrong with me. I felt something was making me unhappy and I didn't like myself."

"I let myself feel the pain. I laid down on my bed. Things came back. There were sounds of heavy breathing, sexual breathing, an odd crinkling sound which I later figured out was bedclothes, and at the same time, with horrible feelings of betrayal, and an immediate knowledge that I was being sexually abused. I felt like I was young. I didn't have any idea who was doing it."

He told his wife and asked his parents who might have been responsible. They did not know.

Later, Fitzpatrick made a conscious decision to feel the pain.

"Memories of Father Porter came back," he said.

Fitzpatrick is quick to defend his recollections against the "slime balls" who say memories cannot be repressed and later recalled. He notes he was not in therapy at the time, not on medication, nor hypnotized, and no one was planting ideas in his head.

Once he knew his attacker was Porter, he decided he wanted to stop the man from hurting anyone else.

Fitzpatrick needed five weeks to find Porter. Then it took four years for Fitzpatrick to convince others that Porter should be prosecuted.

Church officials in the Fall River Diocese in Massachusetts said they did not have information on Porter, which Fitzpatrick later learned was a lie. It angered him when one told him to "leave it in the hands of the Lord."

As a private investigator in the insurance industry, he knew how to follow a paper trail using public records. That led him to an obituary for Porter's father, which said Porter lived in Minnesota. He learned Porter had left the priesthood, married, and had children.

Fitzpatrick believed he had to warn Porter's wife that her husband was a threat to her children. He called the home and spoke with Porter, who admitted his crimes but said he was "cured."

Fitzpatrick was wary. He recorded three phone conversations with Porter, then began looking for others to corroborate his allegations.

After contacting former schoolmates by phone and placing

"Remember Father Porter?" ads in newspapers, Fitzpatrick found several people willing to go forward with their allegations. But prosecutors declined to bring charges against Porter, saying the case was too old.

After Fitzpatrick and others went public on a Boston television news program and the story received national attention, prosecutors reconsidered.

A jury convicted Porter of molesting 28 children in Massachusetts in the 1960s, and a judge sentenced him to 18 to 20 years in prison. Porter, 60, will be eligible for parole in 1999.

Fitzpatrick was livid at the sentence. "I feel this guy should have been kept out of circulation for life."

He also still is angry at Porter, but believes his public pursuit of the former priest served as a catharsis.

"It affects me a lot less than it did. When my memories came back, I could pin down where my unresolved anger and depression came from," Fitzpatrick said.

Now, Fitzpatrick is writing a chapter for a book on trauma and memory, and maintains a data base of perpetrators' names so victims of the same attacker can contact one another.

Fitzpatrick suggests that people who suffer sexual abuse start by telling a spouse, friend or therapist.

"The goal is to name names and expose the crime," he said.

If it's not possible to prosecute, at least "the truth can always be told, so (people) can make a knowledgeable decision about whether to trust that person who has been a perpetrator in the past," he said.