

Sunday



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Diocese struggles with faith Two go public with abuse charges

By KITTY McGARRY
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HECTOR — It is not an easy story to tell.

But, Bob Schwiderski feels it is important. Even though it makes his palms sweat, he needs to talk about the sexual abuse he says he endured years ago as an altar boy at St. John's Catholic Church in Hector.

Schwiderski, along with two other former altar boys, is suing the church and the Diocese of New Ulm. The men, now in their 40s, have accused the Rev. Wm. J. Marks of sexually abusing them. Marks served in Hector between 1954 and 1962. He died in 1979.

The suit, which was filed at the end of April, is about obtaining treatment and healing the pain, said Schwiderski,

who now lives in Ranier, in northern Minnesota.

"I want my mental health back ... I want to be able to correct mistakes I've made with my family," he said. "I want to make sure my offspring are not re-victimized because of actions I have for things I can't control."

Schwiderski and another of the former Hector altar boys, Robert Phillips, have come forward to speak publicly about their experience on the advice of their therapists. Schwiderski has spoken to two Twin Cities newspapers, as well as his hometown newspaper.

"My own mental health says I have to get it off my chest ... get it out. By talking about it, I change the power of this thing," Schwiderski said.

Another reason he is speaking out is because he is convinced there are

others who were victimized by Marks. He hopes his story will help them realize they were victims and that they need help.

Schwiderski became an altar boy in 1956. He was seven years old.

What should have been a time to build a basis of faith for life instead destroyed his faith, he said.

The abuse allegedly began with whisker rubs and hugs, he said. "From that, he expanded his abuse through kissing, fondling," and finally, simulated intercourse. Schwiderski said.

In 1962, the parents of another altar boy confronted the trustees of the church about alleged sexual abuse, Schwiderski said. Marks was then transferred to St. Clotilde in Green Valley, which was his last assignment

Abuse

continued on page 8A

Abuse

continued from page 1A

before he retired.

Schwiderski struggles with feelings of shame and guilt, and lack of understanding what had happened. The others never said anything about the incidents, he said.

After high school, Schwiderski entered the military and served in Vietnam. After three years in the service, he went to school for a while, without any real direction.

"In the service I started to drink and do drugs. After the service, that stuff did not stop," he said.

In the mid-1970s, he bought a bar in Bird Island. Later, he moved into the economic development field, achieving success for a few different Minnesota cities. During this time, he had married and started a family.

However, in 1989, "everything just kind of came crashing down ... that's when I realized the shame and guilt."

He quit a job where he held the status of director for the first economic

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continued from page 1A

The diocese is not denying that the alleged misconduct could have taken place. However, Burke said he could not talk about the specific details of this case.

"Not talking about this particular case ... but, these things happen," he said. "We're a church, we have a mission to aid and assist people. That remains even for these people."

"After all these legalities are over, we don't go home ... we still have a bond, a responsibility to these people," Burke said.

The church is still learning how to deal with these kinds of incidents, he said.

The first case in the nation came to

development authority in Minnesota.

"I just kind of dropped out completely ... my marriage was breaking up ... I just couldn't cope anymore. I couldn't concentrate," he said. At the same time, his three children were about the same age he was when the alleged abuse took place. One of his sons even became an altar boy.

He couldn't go to church on Sunday anymore, which caused problems with his wife, a devout Catholic. They finally divorced in late 1989.

When the James Porter sexual abuse case began receiving national attention, Schwiderski began to put the pieces together and realized that he was not the only person to have the experiences he did.

In late 1992, he began to contact the "Boys of Hector," as he calls them, to see if anyone else was having similar problems in their life.

"The pattern of the Boys of Hector, was a general understanding of, yeah, it was happening," he said.

It was happening," he said.

national attention in 1981, he said. Since then, the Catholic Church and New Ulm Diocese have worked to set up policies to deal with sexual offenders within the clergy.

"I feel sorry for these bishops who were thrown into these situations and didn't know what they were doing and they acted like they did," Burke said. "...and we apologize."

Years ago, when it was suspected that a member of the clergy was engaging in misconduct, they were often relocated, Burke said.

Marks was relocated from St. John's to St. Clotilde's in 1962 following allegations from parents that he was sexually abusing their son,

Schwiderski is now in therapy once a week and takes medication to treat depression. He is seeking treatment at the Rogers Memorial Hospital near Milwaukee and asked the New Ulm Diocese to fund the treatment. The program there is specifically set up for victims of clergy abuse, he said.

However, Schwiderski said, the diocese's response was: "for that type of treatment I should be suicidal."

Psychologist Eugene Burke — Bishop Raymond Lucker's delegate in matters pertaining to sexual misconduct — confirmed that the request had been made through Schwiderski's attorney.

"In this day and age, nobody goes to a hospital," unless it is pretty much the last hope, Burke said. There is no evidence that residential treatment programs are better than outpatient treatments, he said.

"We looked at the pattern of treatment before," Burke said. The di-

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according to Schwiderski.

"They didn't know any better. We're not shying away from the fact that these things happened," Burke said. "We're just as devastated."

Since that first case surfaced in 1981, Burke said, the church has made strides. In fact, he has recently finished writing a set of documents outlining policy for dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct.

They were written not because the

allegations have become more widespread but because there was no written policy, Burke said.

The documents were also written so that church members could relax within them, said Paula Marti, direc-

tor of communications for the New Ulm Diocese.

"They can be confident that people will be handled consistently," Marti said. "That people will be safe within those structures."

"The church's attention has been got," Burke said. "And while we can't undo the past, we can try to repair the damage that's been done."

There are three cases going on in the Diocese right now, Marti said. Also accused of sexual misconduct have been the Rev. Douglas Schleisman, and the Rev. Michael Skoblik, who died in 1989. Legal proceedings in the Schleisman case began in June 1993 and proceedings in the Skoblik case began in October, 1993.

dealing with this thing, it was felt by professionals that an in-patient group program specifically dealing with my problems — because I'm a victim of clergy abuse — would be ideal treatment," he said. "I don't want to fall into a suicidal depression and then say, 'Okay, now help me.'"

Most of all, Schwiderski wants to get better and get on with his life. Speaking publicly about it has helped, he said.

"For a while, I had the guilt. But, it's been addressed to me that I'm the victim so I have nothing to be guilty of," he said. "But, the shame is there. By being able to talk about it these last couple weeks, I feel that the shame issue is leaving."

issue is leaving.

case was not convinced that Schwiderski had tried out-patient treatment on a continual basis.

Schwiderski finds fault with that line of thinking.

"Because I was having a hard time