



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

# Former Pace wrestler accuses ex-dean of sexual abuse

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SEPTEMBER 14, 2013 12:00 AM , UPDATED SEPTEMBER 14, 2013 08:20 PM

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At his Catholic high school, he seemed to have everything going for him: decent grades, lots of friends and a real shot at winning the state wrestling championship in his weight class.

But during his senior year at Monsignor Edward Pace High School in Miami Gardens, he started skipping school and flunking classes. And he quit the wrestling team.

All to avoid one man: Marist Brother Ken Ward, the school's dean of students.

"I would drive from Aventura to Pace, but I couldn't be there because of him, so I would turn around," said the former student, now 27. "I was so embarrassed inside because I let him touch me."

Ward, who was in charge of discipline at the Archdiocese of Miami school, would regularly summon him on the public-address system to his office and instruct him to undress, according to the former Pace student's lawsuit, which was filed this month against Ward and the archdiocese. As a ruse, he said, the dean would accuse him of using steroids so he could inspect his muscular body, with the office blinds shut so no one else could see.

“The worst thing that happened to me was, he came up behind me and grabbed my body and grabbed my genitals,” the man, identified as “John Doe D” in his suit, told the Miami Herald. “Afterward, I told him I would call 911. I was more scared it would get out to the rest of the school. I went to my car and cried.”

That was a decade ago. Now, the former Pace student, an only child whose education was paid for by a concerned aunt, managed to graduate with his class in 2004. After attending community colleges, he bounced around as a sports radio journalist for several years and also spent time in Costa Rica to escape South Florida.

But an addiction to drugs eventually overwhelmed his life, leading to an arrest for cocaine possession last year. “The drugs helped me forget all those bad memories,” he said.

A diversionary program in Broward County drug court helped him go straight and get therapy. Still, he can’t erase Ward from his memory, he says. “I would just like some justice, so I could smile again,” he said.

Reached by a Miami Herald reporter, the 56-year-old Ward hung up his cellphone when asked about the sex-abuse allegations. His defense attorney, William Norris, did not return emails and telephone calls to his Miami office.

A spokeswoman for the archdiocese, Mary Ross Agosta, declined to comment because she had not seen the lawsuit.

But she noted in response to a previous suit filed against Ward that he was not an ordained priest and was assigned to Pace by the Marist Brothers, a New Jersey-based religious order that provides faculty members to Catholic schools around the country.

Ward, who took his vows as a Marist Brother in 1984 and taught for years at Catholic schools in the Northeast, later worked as the dean of students at the coed Pace high school from 2000 to 2006. In 2006, he transferred as an assistant principal/academic dean to the all-boys Christopher Columbus High School in West Miami-Dade, a Catholic school owned by the Marist Brothers.

It was a “routine transfer,” Marist Brother Roy George told the Herald.

Ward left Columbus, as well as the Marist Brothers, in 2008 of “his own accord,” George said. Ward changed careers and studied to become a registered nurse, obtaining his state license in 2012. He now works at Fort Lauderdale Hospital, a psychiatric facility for adults and adolescents on East Las Olas Boulevard.

Last month, three other Pace students (“John Does A, B and M”), all now in their mid-20s, filed a similar suit in Miami-Dade Circuit Court against Ward and the Miami archdiocese, alleging liability, negligence and a cover-up. Two of them played on Pace’s baseball team.

One of the three men also claims that Pace’s supervisory principal, the Rev. Gustavo Miyares, had sexually abused him in the late 1990s when he was enrolled and served as an altar boy at Immaculate Conception Catholic School in Hialeah.

Miyares, who had been the pastor of Immaculate Conception, resigned from the Miami archdiocese in 2006 after another former altar boy accused him of abusing him sexually in the early 1980s. That former altar boy sued the diocese. At least two additional alleged victims at Immaculate Conception filed similar claims.

Miyares, 66, could not be reached for comment.

What sets the four former Pace students’ claims apart from dozens of other clergy sex-abuse cases filed against the archdiocese over the past decade is the lengthy period of the alleged abuse and its relatively recent history.

“Nobody called him on it,” said one of the three alleged victims, “John Doe M,” referring to Ward. “Nobody had the guts. . . . The only way we could cope with it was to joke about it.”

According to the four men’s lawsuits, Ward was in charge of discipline at Pace, and repeatedly brought the minor boys into his office, first in groups, then individually — “locking the door, snapping the blinds closed, and forcing them to take their clothes off and participate in sexual conduct while Ward masturbated both himself and the young boys.”

Said the four men’s Miami lawyer, Ira Leesfield: “He picked out the sweetest, nicest, most vulnerable kids and betrayed them. . . . I want a fair settlement that will take care of them for a lifetime.”

This summer, Ward's past caught up to him and Pace. High school principal Ana Garcia sent emails and letters to Pace alumni to alert them to the initial three men's allegations against Ward and to urge them to contact the archdiocese if they had similar concerns.

A copy of Garcia's correspondence was provided to the Miami Herald.

"It is with sadness that I write to you to report that Monsignor Edward Pace High School was recently made aware of allegations of sexual misconduct involving Brother Kenneth Ward, a former dean of students," Garcia wrote to one alumnus. "We take these allegations very seriously and have notified legal authorities so that appropriate investigations and notifications can be undertaken."

Garcia, whose husband, Edward, is the former principal of Immaculate Conception Catholic School, did not return a call seeking comment.

According to public records, a Pace teacher reported alleged sexual misconduct by Ward to the Miami-Dade Police Department in 2006 and to Ana Garcia, the principal, the previous year, raising the question of whether the school only recently learned about the allegations.

The teacher was "not sure exactly what Ms. Garcia did with the information he provided," stated an October 2006 police report. "He heard a rumor that Ms. Garcia attempted to solicit information from the students. However, none of the students came forward."

The police incident report shows that a sexual crimes detective interviewed the teacher and five students believed to have been targets of Ward's alleged sexual abuse, but concluded no crime was committed.

Among the potential victims interviewed: One of the men who later filed suit against Ward. According to the report, the man told the detective that he had never had any problems with Ward.

"I would second-guess anyone who made any type of allegations against Mr. Ward," the man told the detective in 2006, adding that Ward was "one of the better teachers" at Pace and that he viewed him as his "mentor."

Asked why he made those complimentary statements about Ward, John Doe M told the Herald: "I still feared him. I just didn't want to open up those memories again." He said Ward even called him after he spoke to the detective, and intimidated him into not saying anything bad about him.

The former Pace wrestler had also tried to bury Ward in the past, he said, until he was contacted this summer as a potential witness in the suit filed by the other three former Pace students.

Although he does not know the others because he graduated a few years before them, the one-time wrestler's story was strikingly similar.

He said Ward made him feel dirty and shameful, and stole his youth and his dreams: "I wish I could do high school over again."

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