

NEW YORK, SPECIAL REPORTS

# Haitian-American Sues Cardinal Hayes High School, Alleging Catholic Priest Abused Him In 1980s



BY JONATHAN GREIG  
SEP. 29, 2019



Lawyer Patrick Noaker speaking in front of a New York City courthouse with sexual abuse survivors last month.  
(Credit: Jonathan Greig)

By Jonathan Greig



Lawyer Patrick Noaker speaking in front of a New York City courthouse with sexual abuse survivors last month. (Credit: Jonathan Greig)

He was just 15 when husky friar Brother John Justin O'Connor angrily forced him to come to his office for showing up to school late one morning in 1986.

O'Connor proceeded to stuff his hand down the 15-year-old's pants and fondled him, setting off a lifetime of anxiety, depression and alcoholism.

"I was stunned by it because when you grew up in the Catholic religion, you respect the priest," said TC, a Haitian-American New Yorker who filed a lawsuit against Cardinal Hayes High School and the Archdiocese of New York two weeks ago.

"In Haitian culture, you just have that respect for everyone so I was taken aback and stunned. I pushed his hand away and said, 'What are you doing?'"

He spoke to The Haitian Times on condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation from the church and backlash from his community.

TC said because of what he went through with O'Connor, he has spent decades suffering from anxiety and depression. He has been wracked with guilt over what happened to him and many of his romantic relationships have suffered because of it.

"It affects you mentally, it really does. So sometimes you get depressed, anxiety. And internally, you try to deal with it the best you can. I'm sure a lot of survivors have dealt with this," TC said.

Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx was once renowned for educating a generation of Italian, Jewish, Black and Hispanic immigrants **but is now dogged by decades of sexual misconduct allegations** against dozens of teachers, priests and administrators.

O'Connor, the priest identified by TC in his lawsuit, **has dozens of allegations against him** and was repeatedly allowed to move to different high schools in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York.

He worked as Dean of Discipline at Cardinal Hayes High School **until multiple allegations forced him to leave in 1987**. He was moved to Bergen Catholic High School that same year before moving again to Iona Prep. O'Connor was president of the school before stepping down in 2003 and moving to New York City's Power Memorial Academy until 2011.

The lawsuits stemming from O'Connor's abuse accusations forced the **Congregation of Christian Brothers to file for bankruptcy** in April 2011. They had to pay out \$16.5 million to 400 women and men who say they were molested by priests associated with the educational religious order.

In 2011, O'Connor was allowed to simply surrender his teaching license and leave the Congregation of Christian Brothers without admitting any wrongdoing. His whereabouts are currently unknown.

Cardinal Hayes was rocked by allegations against O'Connor that were **published in The New York Daily News** in 2016. Kirk Balay claims O'Connor physically and mentally abused him in 1985 and 1986. When he told administrators and his parents, he was ignored and called a liar.

"What would help me move forward is making Cardinal Hayes and this terrorist O'Connor accountable for destroying people's lives," **Balay told The Daily News in 2016**.

“My soul was murdered at Cardinal Hayes. O’Connor started it with his abuse. O’Keefe finished it by saying I was a liar and creating distrust between my mother and I.”

In the last decade, allegations have come out **against dozens of Cardinal Hayes officials**. Father Robert Harrison was fired in 2014 after admitting to abusing students in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2009, former Dean of Discipline James West pleaded guilty to second-degree harassment after being charged with forcible touching and sexual abuse.

Cardinal Hayes did not respond to repeated requests for comment, but in other articles throughout the past two weeks, the school has referred reporters to Joseph Zwilling, the director of communications for the New York Archdiocese. Zwilling **released a statement in August** addressing the deluge of lawsuits against Cardinal Hayes and the New York Archdiocese.

“The Archdiocese of New York has been anticipating the filing of lawsuits since the Child Victims Act passed earlier this year, even as we continue to invite people to consider our successful program to bring compensation quickly to qualified claimants through the archdiocesan Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program,” Zwilling said.

“While we carefully review the claims made in these suits, we ask that people pray for peace and healing for all those who have suffered from the sin and crime of the sexual abuse of minors, wherever it occurred, particularly victim-survivors and their families.”

O’Connor has been implicated in **dozens of other lawsuits** throughout New York and New Jersey from students who attended Cardinal Hayes and Iona Prep.

TC and his lawyer Peter Noaker said priests like O’Connor developed a pattern and specifically identified kids they knew would be easy to target. Other immigrant students at Cardinal Hayes have come forward to say they were sexually abused by O’Connor, who was allowed to leave the school in 1986 after multiple allegations came out against him.

**“A lot of these predators they profile you. So they see a single parent, my mom came from Haiti so she didn’t know too much in terms of education or what to do or the rights. She was brought up in respecting the Catholic religion and you don’t go against it. They have 100% full trust,” TC told The Haitian Times.**

“Situations like that that would happen, and with other kids things were happening. We wouldn’t talk about it but things were happening and it wasn’t until we graduated that all these stories kept

coming up more and more and more. We started seeing how severe of the consequences that happened to Hayes guys. Being depressed and alcohol, drug abuse and suicide.”

More than 400 lawsuits **have been filed in New York since the state legislature** finally passed the long-gestating Child Victims Act in February and put it into action weeks ago. The law created a one-year “lookback” window where survivors of sexual abuse can sue people or institutions, regardless of how long ago it occurred.

Almost **170 cases in New York City alone** were filed on August 14, the first day of the one-year window. The Archdiocese of New York has already reached settlements with more than 300 people **worth a total of \$65 million**.

“We want kids to be safer, so we have to know where our predators are. Unfortunately, we would think that we could trust the Archdiocese and the church to tell us where the bad guys are but we now know that we can’t. So now this Child Victims Act is going to expose predators that we didn’t know about before and so we can protect our children from those predators,” Noaker said at a press conference on the steps of a New York courthouse.

“We also need to take care of the people that have been hurt. They need help. That’s the whole point of the signs today. Depression, fear, anxiety. Those folks need some help, some doctors and counselors. So we need to help them pay for it. So we’re gonna get them money to do that. I don’t shy away from that.”

The law spent more than a decade languishing in the state senate because the Catholic Church spent millions fighting it with an army of lobbyists. Senate Democrats were finally able to push it through after taking the majority in the 2018 election.

Part of that final push relied heavily on the testimony of powerful Haitian-American Assemblywoman Rodneyse Bichotte. Before the final vote on January 28, Bichotte shared a deeply personal story that resembled part of what TC went through at Cardinal Hayes.

Assemblywoman Rodneyse Bichotte

Bichotte **told the Assembly floor that when she was just 10 years old**, she was injured in a car accident and bedridden. She was forced to be homeschooled and her mother would invite large prayer groups to their home. One pastor would hang around after the prayer group and **began to molest her** in different parts of the house



“I was afraid for a very long time to come forward. For the risk of being blamed for my own pain,” **Bichotte said in January.**

“Not only was I embarrassed but I was afraid to be blamed, so I kept it to myself. As I spoke to some of my peers who were my age, I realized I wasn’t alone. They, too, were being molested and they, too, were silent. Whether it was a father, an uncle, a friend, or a clergy person, we were all in this together.”

In January, the 45-year-old Bichotte **said she still had not even spoken about the situation with her mother.**

Bichotte **filmed an advertisement about the new law** in Haitian Creole for victims advocacy group Safe Horizon, encouraging Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Americans to come forward with claims of sexual abuse.

TC said was filing a civil case, but his lawyer Noaker said that often the information they find can be referred to prosecutors for criminal cases.

“The good thing about a civil case is we have a bit of a broader law that is going to allow us to get a bit more information. It’s very common that we will then provide it to the prosecutor and say hey, this is what we’re seeing,” Noaker told The Haitian Times.

“Crimes occurred. These cases will start the process within the church to get rid of the bad priests so that they cannot use that collar to get access to more children.”

Noaker said it was common for priests to target immigrant children from countries with heavy Catholic populations knowing they would be afraid to come forward.

Noaker is hoping TC’s story will prompt more Haitians and Haitian-Americans to come forward.

“When he was at Cardinal Hayes, there was a lot of pressure because he’s a first generation kid, and everyone is putting all their bets on him,” Noaker added.

“So it made him more vulnerable. And this piece of s–t took advantage of that and now we’re worried there’s more victims out there that don’t know what to do.”