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Exposed as an abuser, Murphy faces uncertain future in New Mexico

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Last of three parts

The drought has settled in.

When spring arrived in the rangeland abutting the Jemez Mountains, the creeks should have swelled with runoff. But in April, a band of dark silt was all that remained of flowing water in Los Piños Arroyo.

Cows from another ranch had gotten through the fence. They had to be dealt with quickly.

"The problem is they eat all kinds of grass that my stock has to eat," said Frank Murphy, former Anchorage priest. "When it's this sparse,

it's every man for himself. Christianity is nice, but don't push it when there's no grass."

As serious as the drought is, Murphy has bigger problems. The new life he built for himself in this sparsely populated region 80 miles northwest of Albuquerque is teetering. At age 71, he has finally been exposed for sexually abusing young men in Anchorage, where he served more than 25 years in the Roman Catholic archdiocese.

Twice before Murphy escaped notoriety -- in 1985 when Anchorage police threatened to arrest him for sexual misconduct with boys unless he moved away, and in 1995, after a previously unknown incident in Anchorage surfaced and he was forced into retirement in Boston.

Murphy moved to the 80-acre ranch about four miles up the Rio Puerco from Cuba in 1995. Cuba, a poor, mostly Hispanic and Navajo town of about 1,000 people, had many opportunities for an activist, energetic, articulate man like "Murph." He joined just about every public service organization in town, from the committee that built the world's biggest burrito in 2001 (it was surveyed at 7,856 feet and snaked around Cuba on folding tables) to a task force on economic development. He tried several times to resume functioning as a priest

at the Immaculate Conception parish church in town.

But now everyone in town knows about his past. Murphy says he is laying low.

Murphy acknowledges the known abuse cases in which he's accused. He says he lies awake at night wondering if there are more he does not remember, events lost in the fog of a long-ago life as an alcoholic parish priest in Muldoon.

'NOT WHAT I WANT TO BE DOING'

As the vicar general of the Anchorage Archdiocese, the Rev. Steven Moore has had to contend with the mess left behind by Murphy.

"You know, I spend a whole lot of my life dealing with the consequences of what he did, and not at all happily," Moore said recently. "This is not what I want to be doing."

On Dec. 19, 1994, Kent Podvin, one of four siblings who grew up attending St. Patrick's Parish when Murphy was the priest there, provided Moore a detailed account of how he was abused by Murphy in 1979. Though Moore had heard rumors and allegations of abuse, this was the first time he had heard a victim's story. Podvin's

accusations were aggravated by the fact that he was 16 or 17 when it occurred. (Moore wouldn't learn until years later that Podvin's younger brother Pat had complained in 1982 to Archbishop Francis Hurley about a sexual approach made by Murphy when Pat was 18.)

In 1994, Murphy was still officially attached to the Anchorage Archdiocese even though he had been living in the Boston area since 1986 and had begun a second career as chaplain at Holy Family Hospital and Medical Center, formerly Bon Secours Hospital, in Methuen, Mass.

Moore said Podvin's story sounded completely believable, but he said he wanted to hear from Murphy himself. After finding out Murphy would be in Boston, Moore flew there, telling only one official of the Boston diocese what his mission would be. Moore wanted to surprise Murphy, and he apparently did.

"My anxiety went into overdrive when he said that he was in Boston and wanted to talk," Murphy wrote in a letter to Hurley a few days after the Jan. 9, 1995, meeting. The letter was one of thousands of documents from the personnel files of accused priests released as the result of a lawsuit brought against the church by The Boston Globe.

When the two priests met in Boston, Murphy told Moore that Podvin was telling the truth.

"When he admitted that, there were a lot of questions then about whether it was appropriate for him to stay in ministry," Moore said in an interview. While he and other officials appreciated the fact that Murphy acknowledged accusations when they were made, it was always in reaction to a victim's assertion.

"Frank never did wholly (admit) until each time it was confronted on an individual basis," Moore said.

Murphy was whisked out of the hospital and sent for a weeklong evaluation at St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Md., a Catholic facility for troubled -clergy.

BANNED IN BOSTON

The cardinal in Boston, Bernard Law, was forced to resign last year for protecting priests accused of sexual misconduct, shuffling them from one parish to another around the large archdiocese. But Law showed little tolerance for Murphy.

After Murphy returned from St. Luke's, the Rev. Brian Flatley,

assistant to the secretary for ministerial personnel for the Boston Archdiocese, noted in a March 2, 1995, confidential memo to file that he planned to make a "strong case" that Murphy be allowed to stay at Holy Family Hospital, and that he would expect the review commission to go along. Two of Murphy's supervisors at the hospital wanted to keep him for three more years, when Murphy would retire.

In its April 3, 1995, report to Cardinal Law, the commission noted that Murphy had been "a very successful hospital chaplain" but was mixed in its assessment.

"The priest is a charming man, who has a history of being loose with the truth when it suits his purpose. His Bishop (Hurley), who has been extremely supportive of him, is aware of his tactics and is honest and firm with him."

The commission voted with two abstentions to recommend that Law keep Murphy at the hospital. But Law, expressing continued concerns about Murphy, rejected the decision and sent it back.

At its meeting the next month, on May 4, the commission issued a new one-sentence decision: "While the Board feels this priest could be continued in his present position, the Board supports the Cardinal's

decision."

Law again rejected the commission's report, this time because it was too weak. He and the Boston vicar general, William Murphy, believed the risk posed by Frank Murphy was too great and wanted the commission to say so directly and emphatically. In their message to the commission, Law and the vicar general said, "It is likely a hospital chaplain will come in ministerial contact with minors who are relatives of patients or employees of the hospital. While there is some supervision of this priest while he is working, there is no supervision after working hours."

On June 5, 1995, the review board said Murphy should be terminated at the hospital and

"not be assigned to ministry in the future." Law accepted the decision on June 12.

On June 20, 1995, 10 years to the day after he was told he would have to leave Anchorage, Flatley told Murphy he was through in Boston.

LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

Murphy was thinking ahead to retirement in 1992 when a friend in Albuquerque saw an ad for an 80-acre ranch near Cuba, N.M., an area that's seeing increasing numbers of retirees, including a few from

Alaska. Murphy owned the ranch for five months before he set foot on it.

In October 1994, Murphy sold most of his land holdings in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, his "Shangri-La" off Buffalo Mine Road, and applied the money to his mortgage in New Mexico. The next March, three months before he was forced into retirement, Murphy and the Rev. Flatley were talking about the future.

"We talked again about retirement and agreed that sitting in New Mexico watching the sun go down would kill him," Flatley wrote in a memo to his files. "I urged him to think about it. It's not that far away."

Murphy indeed reconsidered when he was sent away from Boston. He moved to the ranch but wasn't exactly sitting around passively watching the days go by. He named the place "Caparnaum" after the Galilee village where Jesus took up residence upon leaving Nazareth and began building a retreat there.

The town of Cuba sits in an arid plain filled with sagebrush and tumbleweed, but Caparnaum is nearly 1,000 feet higher, in juniper and piñon. Despite the drought, when a reporter visited this spring the grass was showing signs of greening up, much to the delight of

Murphy's four llamas, two goats and assorted other herbivores. A neighboring mountain lion took care of the turkey last year, and Murphy isn't trying that again. The national forest starts behind his ranch, and pines run up the distant ridgeline.

Today, at age 71, Murphy is wiry and fit, with only the slightest stoop. The photograph in his home showing a puffy-fleshed, aging priest meeting the pope some two decades ago could be a different person.

"Geez, I look back at my picture, and you can hardly recognize me," he said.

Murphy nods in agreement as he listens to how he has been described: articulate, charismatic, charming, maybe a bit of a con man.

"And a drunk," Murphy added. "You've got to put that in."

Murphy said he stopped drinking in 1985, but alcohol is still a huge factor in his life.

"As you may or may not know, that condition is for life, from birth, everything a person does." But he quickly added: "I'm not blaming it"

for the problems he has had.

Murphy has made a profession out of addictions, earning a master's degree in counseling since arriving in New Mexico. Ever energetic, he has built a ceremonial Pueblo Indian kiva and a Russian poustinia hut for silent prayer. He has a small graveyard for the cremated ashes of people he knows, including several from Alaska, and has picked out a spot for his own remains. Priests and others in recovery have stayed with him for as long as eight months. He has a contract with the Navajos to counsel tribal members with addictions.

He also tried to resume work as a priest.

MURPHY ATTEMPTS RETURN

Cuba is a distant outpost of the Gallup Diocese, and its Immaculate Conception parish church has been at times without a pastor. Murphy sought to fill the void.

"The parish was vacant for a while," said Deacon Timoteo Lujan, the chancellor of the Gallup Diocese and spokesman for Bishop Donald Pelotte. "The priest had to leave the country for 3 1/2 months. They have a deacon, but he's driving from 90 miles away. Trying to deal with all of this, it came to our attention that the monsignor (Murphy)

wasn't being completely honest about what he could and could not do as a priest."

On Dec. 16, 1995, Murphy wrote Bishop Pelotte, seeking "faculties," or authorization to practice as a priest. He described himself as a recovering alcoholic, listed personal references and said he had been encouraged by Archbishop Hurley to seek active ministry, according to documents provided by the Gallup Diocese. A background check by Gallup turned up nothing criminal and on Feb. 13, 1996, he was granted the faculties he sought.

Then Hurley found out, according to the Gallup files, and contacted Pelotte. On March 6, three weeks after it was granted, Murphy's authorization to function as a priest was withdrawn. Nevertheless, that April, he celebrated a funeral Mass in Cuba. When the diocese office found out, Murphy was "severely reprimanded."

Hurley has repeatedly declined to be interviewed about Murphy. In a carefully worded

statement he provided to the Daily News, Hurley said that in a conversation with Bishop

Pelotte before Murphy moved to New Mexico, "I stated that he had some personal problems

and that if he were to contact the bishop, the bishop should talk with me before establishing

a working relationship with Monsignor Murphy. When I heard that Monsignor Murphy had

been given faculties for the Diocese of Gallup, I immediately called the Bishop and instructed

him to withdraw the faculties. He did so immediately. The Anchorage vicar general (Moore) also wrote the bishop about this."

Despite the official ban, Murphy was becoming popular in Cuba, and the only information the Gallup diocese received from Hurley and the Anchorage Archdiocese was that Murphy had a drinking problem, Lujan said. He and Bishop Pelotte were puzzled by the insistence of Anchorage that Murphy not be granted faculties just because of that. They heard that some residents were going to Murphy's ranch for Mass, Lujan said.

"Cuba is a small town away from everywhere. People in northern New Mexico are unique and cliquish. They don't want to be told by the bishop in Gallup where to go to Mass," Lujan said.

In December 2001, Murphy again wrote to Pelotte, asking for faculties, and again he was reminded that nothing had changed since 1996. But the exchange prompted Lujan to get in touch with Moore in Anchorage.

As it happened, at just that time the Anchorage Archdiocese was in the middle of a private uproar with the Podvin family. On March 29, 2002, in an article published in the Catholic Anchor, the Archdiocese's official newspaper, the newly installed archbishop, Roger Schwietz, was quoted as saying, "There have been no cases or accusations of pedophilia or sexual abuse of youngsters that have come to my attention up here." The headline on that front-page story said, "No sex abuse problems apparent in archdiocese."

The article inflamed Michelle Boyden, sister of Kent and Pat Podvin, who both complained to the archdiocese about being abused as youngsters by Murphy some two decades earlier. Boyden and Kent Podvin demanded a retraction, and weeks later Schwietz corrected himself in the paper, though vaguely: "I have discovered that though there are no known incidents of child or youth sexual abuse by clergy as having happened in the past 10 years, there were some incidents reported as having happened before that." Though Moore himself took the complaint from Kent Podvin in 1994 about incidents that took place when Kent was 16 or 17, on April 10, 2002, he faxed a memo to Lujan that said Murphy "was a retired priest in good standing with the Archdiocese of Anchorage and that there were no reports of sexual involvement with minors," according to a document in Gallup

summarizing the exchange. Lujan declined to provide the original to the Daily News.

Moore also declined to provide the document.

"What I had said was, (Murphy had) no criminal contact with minors," Moore said in an interview.

In any event, Moore said, the April 10 fax was followed by a telephone call involving himself, Hurley, Hurley's replacement Schwietz and Bishop Pelotte during which Murphy's background was fully disclosed.

On April 17, 2002, Pelotte reminded Cuba's Immaculate Conception Parish in a letter read at Mass that Murphy was not authorized to perform "any type of public ministry," but no reason was given.

WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

With his secret still intact, Murphy began working with a school program. Last year, a therapist friend, Gail Bern-stein, received a contract from the Cuba Independent Schools to conduct group sessions with high school drop-outs, many of them with drug and alcohol problems, and she asked Murphy to help. The workshop program, called "Thinking Out of the School Box," was paid under a

federal grant and began Jan. 7 with two afternoon sessions a week.

Murphy and Bernstein worked at the district's alternative school, where counselor John Salaz had an office. Salaz had come to know Murphy by serving with him on one of the local civic groups, the Cuba All-Around Bunch.

"To me, he was a very influential person. He has a background in psychology and in how to motivate people and build trust in them," Salaz said. "He made you feel like, 'Go with your dreams.' "

Salaz was attending church at Immaculate Conception last year when Bishop Pelotte's letter was read aloud.

"After the letter, people were suspicious," Salaz said. "It was a very indirect letter -- it left a lot for your own imagination."

The guessing was over on Feb. 6. Salaz got to work early that day, switched on his computer and checked the morning news on the KOB-TV Web site. One of the top news items from the Albuquerque station was an Associated Press report naming Murphy as a sexual abuser, reporting his record from Boston and giving his current whereabouts as Cuba. The news floored Salaz, who quickly alerted district officials.

"It caught the School District off guard," said Christina Baca, the acting school superintendent.

Bernstein was called into the superintendent's office that day and told the news.

"I was completely in a state of shock," Bernstein said. "I could hardly find the door."

The program was suspended and each of the 15 students privately interviewed, Bernstein said. Murphy had never been alone with any of them, Baca said, and none reported that Murphy did anything improper.

Nevertheless, Murphy was told he wouldn't be allowed to continue when Bernstein resumed the program.

"Student safety is our top priority," Baca said. Murphy was understanding, she said. "He said, 'You know, I just need to regroup.' "

"An experience like this hurts because our intentions were noble," Baca said. "When something like this happens, it's discouraging, but we have to move on."

Tony Archuleta, the assistant superintendent, took the blame for failing to uncover Murphy's background, though there was little he could have done. With no criminal record, Murphy's name wouldn't have surfaced in a records check, and local police weren't alerted by the Anchorage Archdiocese.

"Frank Murphy served as a kind of confidant to people in the community with a drinking problem," Archuleta said. "When it surfaced, people were in shock. I've been in this business 34 years, and he was one of the most likeable people I have ever met. People couldn't figure out how it could've been concealed for so long."

In Gallup, Lujan was also just finding out about Murphy by the Internet.

"We learned like everyone else, from your newspaper," he said.

He felt betrayed by Moore, who holds a similar position in the Anchorage Archdiocese as Lujan holds in Gallup.

"There really is an unspoken code of conduct: Chancellors ought not lie to one another," Lujan said. "Even Cuba, New Mexico, is not remote enough" for someone like Murphy, Lujan said.

Moore declined to respond to Lujan.

The news set back efforts by Pelotte to recover from scandals that rocked the New Mexico church in the early 1990s, Lujan said.

"The previous bishop of this diocese, he was willing to ordain or take just about anybody," Lujan said. "Gallup got this reputation as a good place to go if you were a complete failure everywhere else. We've spent the best of 10 years trying to turn that around."

Others, though, were terribly saddened for the man who had become their friend.

Hazel Herrera, who with her husband runs Cuba's most famous business, Bruno's Restaurant -- it's said to be the place to stop for travelers between the Four Corners area and Albuquerque -- began to cry when she talked about Murphy two months after his exposure. She said she hopes he can resume a prominent role in the community.

"I've known him since he moved here," she said. "I'm sure that he feels embarrassed, that he had hurt me and my family when it came out. I don't think you should close the door on him for what he did.

"Whether he did it, and he probably did do it, has nothing to do with

what he does now," she said.

Herrera credits Murphy with saving her alcoholic daughter and restoring a normal life for her grandchildren.

"My grandkids have been through a lot, and they look up to him so much," she said. "If we all were the way he is now, everyone's life would be better; we'd all get along."

MURPHY WITHDRAWS

Murphy was in Massachusetts when the news broke. He was having breakfast at his sister's house when his brother called and told him to look in that morning's Boston Globe. Murphy had earlier written his family to confess what he had done, but he never expected the information to be made public by the church.

Now Murphy has withdrawn to his ranch. He still goes to town for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and his friends have asked him to continue on the civic groups, but he's not sure he will.

Sleep comes hard.

"Two Tylenol PMs get me through about four hours, and then I wake

and toss, as one would," he said.

Murphy, in admitting the abuse he's accused of, said he's trying to do in his own life what he tells the alcoholics he counsels.

"As a recovering drunk, I'm showing up, I'm telling the truth, I'm paying attention, I'm letting go of the results. And that's a scary thing to do, like walking on thin ice."

When Pat Podvin, the Service High School principal, appeared on Channel 2 in February to say that Murphy attempted to sexually abuse him, Murphy sent him an apology. Podvin wrote back and said he forgave him, "unconditionally," Murphy said, choking back tears.

"People don't know. They hear this awful stuff and say, 'Geez.' They don't know, like it's daily, crawling out of your bed and saying, 'Jesus, keep me free from drink today,' every single [expletive] day of my life since I got sober, 19 years," he said.

Murphy is especially thankful to Archbishop Hurley for supporting him through the years. When other bishops, at their meeting in Dallas last year, were proposing "zero tolerance" for any priest accused of sexual misconduct, Hurley stood up for other long-held Catholic values,

Murphy said.

"They had this great cover-your-own-ass type thing, get out of the canoe before somebody sinks it," Murphy said. "He was the only one who stood up and said, 'What about repentance? What about forgiveness? What about an act of love to somebody who has screwed up, has repented, has said I'm sorry?' Now you're going to leave him hang -- and the bishops did, they let them hang. Hundreds and hundreds of guys hanging. But Hurley alone stood up alone and said, 'You guys can't do this.' "

Murphy believes Hurley may have been thinking of him.

"There's others too," he said, referring to other Anchorage priests with drinking problems. "He's been heartbroken by some, and I could cry when I say this, he hasn't been with me, and I'm very glad about that. I haven't done anything to offend him. I did exactly what I had to do, maybe for the first time in my life," he said, referring to his getting sober in 1985.

"And it's now all these years later. You know, you get to the point where you say, Jesus, you know, somebody will listen to that." But Murphy doesn't think anyone is listening to his apologies and

explanations. "In fact I'm sure they're not. That's what's so hurtful about this."

Watching the priest scandal unfold from his unique perspective, Murphy has his own ideas about why it happened. The slow-moving bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the church can be very frustrating and demoralizing to activist priests like himself. Those priests might find solace where they can, he said.

"The grace of God works like lightning. It hits. And you have to respond, you know. And I think one of the major problems with the church all over the country is you've got to go through these dreadful channels," he said.

The priests who got into problems sexually "were getting any kind of solace they could get," Murphy said. "I think a lot of it is solace. Celibacy is not impossible to deal with. It really isn't. And I think sexual involvements, on the homosexual way, as well as the heterosexual way, is not so much sexual as it is solace.

"I think people are looking for consolation, they're looking for someone to say, 'Oh, let me hug ya.' I think it's the need of having somebody enfold you and say, 'It's OK.'

"And of course we (as priests) don't have anybody. You go home at night and geez, you want to kick that dog or kill somebody, because there's nobody to (enfold) you. So you have a drink, or you pull out pornography or you (masturbate), whatever. But in terms of sexual intimacy, that is to say, a lifelong commitment, I think most of the guys wouldn't want any part of that. That would be inhibiting the freedom that they do have," he said.

"The sexual part of celibacy is not nearly as difficult to give up, and to be deprived of, and to be separate from, as the solace part of it, the hug, the warmth. And unless a person is very, very well-centered, the person is very, very hard-pressed to keep from going astray."

Having gone astray himself, Murphy said, "I brought it on myself; I can't deny that."

"I think of the past, what I did, like the letter I got from Pat Podvin, and (my stomach) churns from that anxiety. That's 20 years ago, and it's still fresh," he said.

What message would he like to send to his victims?

"My apology. A profound apology for a very inappropriate act on my part, whatever it might've been. And a violation of their trust. My

impairment, I think, is what I keep saying. If I wasn't drinking, I would never have done any of this stuff. I mean, I just, it would be inconceivable," he said.

Back in Anchorage, archdiocese officials continue to deal with the fallout from what Murphy did.

"All of the priests in this archdiocese continue to bear the consequences of what Frank did, in a lack of trust, in suspicion, in having to censor their own behavior so as not to put themselves in a position where there could be a suspicion of something," said Moore, the vicar general.

Moore said he is happy for Murphy for turning around his life, but even if his victims have accepted his apologies, that doesn't mean everything is better.

"Forgiveness is happening on one level," Moore said. "But there are natural consequences for things we have done that continue. And that's life."

In all, five men have told the Daily News that Murphy sexually abused them as youngsters, and several of them say they know of more who don't want to come forward. Several members of the Podvin family

say they still are suffering lingering effects, as do Ken Gage, who is in prison, and another man living outside Anchorage who asked that only his first name, Mike, be used, and he is a recovering alcoholic.

Schwietz, the Midwesterner who took over from Hurley as archbishop of Anchorage in March 2001, has never met Murphy, but if he had, he would like to ask him a question: "Are you aware of the pain of the victims still?"

"Forgiveness must be part of it, but there are also consequences to sin, and we have to deal with those consequences too, along with the forgiveness issue," Schwietz said. "That's what we're learning as a church how to deal with. There are consequences to the lives of victims, very serious ones, and consequences for the perpetrators too."

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