MORRIS TOWNSHIP

Delbarton concedes sex abuse allegations

School, abbey acknowledge accusations of 30 people

Justin Zaremba *For Times of Trenton*

Delbarton School and St. Mary's Abbey has, for the first time, publicly acknowledged the accusations of 30 individuals who have alleged abuse by 13 past or current priests and monks there, and one retired lay faculty member, over the course of three decades.

In a letter last Friday to the community, Abbot Richard Cronin and Delbarton Headmaster Michael Tidd also offered an apology "to anyone who has suffered sexual abuse or harassment because of the actions of a St. Mary's Abbey monk or Delbarton School employee."

According to the letter, abbey officials notified the Morris County Prosecutor's Office as each allegation emerged, but criminal charges were filed in only one case. The prosecutor's office declined to discuss its investigations.

Cronin and Tidd also said in the letter that eight of the civil actions brought against the abbey and school in Morris Township since 2012 have been settled, and seven cases are pending.

"In settling these claims, no restrictions have been placed on the victims' ability to discuss their experiences," they said. "This is consistent with our belief that transpar-

SEE DELBARTON, A8

Delbarton

FROM A1

ency may help the victims in their healing and help our community and broader society in preventing this from happening again."

ACCUSATIONS OF ABUSE AND SILENCE

A dozen survivors who have spoken with NJ Advance Media, however, have painted a far starker portrait of the school and abbey — one of rampant abuse, intimidation and, above all, silence.

Among them are: the Crane brothers, who say they've pursued an uphill battle against the school, the abbey and its team of lawyers for nearly a decade; Kieran Kole, a former initiate monk who said he was abused by two other monks and then was solicited for sex by a third during confession; Bill Wolfe, who was among the estimated 50 victims of the Rev. Timothy Brennan; Steve Badt and Joe Discher, who allege they also were victimized by Brennan; and many others.

A pattern of abuse emerges from the details in their stories: Boys were groomed by adults responsible for their education and well-being to accept more and more unacceptable behavior prior to being abused. In many cases, these boys were already isolated from family and friends, and became only more isolated afterward. When they reported it, often to the school leadership, the school and abbey fought tooth-and-nail to keep it quiet, the men say.

A representative of the school and the abbey did not address questions from NJ Advance Media, but sent a statement reiterating the content of the letter and why it was sent to the community: "News media reports in early June about abuse case settlements and ongoing litigation necessitated a response to our community."

A message placed with the general counsel for the Archdiocese of Newark referred comment to the school and abbey.

In the letter to the community, Cronin and Tidd said that the accusations of abuse from 1968 to 1999 involved priests, monks and one retired lay faculty member, but that steps have since been taken to address the abuse. The letter also says the first time an individual stepped forward to report abuse was in 1988.

In fact, a survivor had stepped forward two years earlier.

THE REV. TIMOTHY BRENNAN

The Rev. Timothy Brennan was convicted in 1987 of sexually abusing a 15-year-old boy at Delbarton School the year earlier. Bill Wolfe was that boy.

For three decades, Wolfe was bound by a nondisclosure agreement made as part of a settlement with Delbarton School in 1988, barring him from discussing his case and the settlement. In 2014, he was finally freed from some of the terms of the agreement and allowed to speak about his abuse for the first time.

"They fought me every step of the way. They attacked my family. They attacked my parents, and they attacked me. They sued my attorney for representing me," Wolfe said after the letter was released. "So the idea they've been open and honest and compassionate, that's not been my experience. I've lived a lifetime of anxiety and far from being allowed to speak about it, I'm still not allowed to speak about some issues.

"My family's faith has been destroyed. My faith has been destroyed. I'll never know what I could have been because I spent so many years and so much time dealing with this."

Several men have come forward in the past decade alleging the Rev. Timothy Brennan sexually abused them. *Submitted photo*

William P. Wolfe, left, seen with his attorney Greg Gianforcaro, was among an estimated 50 alleged victims of Brennan. *2014 Times of Trenton file*

Others have accused Brennan of sexual abuse, including Badt, Discher and a man who filed a lawsuit last year under the name of John Doe III. In the latter case, the man accused Brennan of abusing him more than 100 times beginning in 1968.

Tom and Bill Crane, the sons of a former Delbarton teacher and administrator and the first public faces of abuse at the boys' school, say the apology isn't enough.

"The last eight years of litigation, Delbarton did everything to re-victimize and impose more harm rather than repenting," Bill Crane said. "In the absence of Delbarton acknowledging the harm they have caused, there is no hope of any student being safe on the campus of Delbarton."

"Even after this, I'm not allowed to talk about anything involving the case," said Tom Crane, who said he was abused by the Rev. Luke Travers and that his brother Bill was abused by Father Justin Capato. "I have to keep my mouth shut. I didn't realize this battle I picked was going to be a war."

Kieran Kole was a postulant from 1966 to 1971 — an early stage initiate into the monastic life. He said besides living without a concern for earthly finances, there was a frequent culture of indulgence in the abbey that included alcohol and marijuana, as well as sex.

Sex was excused because the vow of chastity under canon law meant not taking a wife — not necessarily abstaining from sex altogether, Kole said. He said it happened frequently within the abbey.

Kole, who is gay, said he was targeted and abused by two monks at the abbey. Even after reporting the abuse to the abbey leadership, he said, nothing changed. When he went to confession to unburden himself, Kole said his confessor made sexual overtures.

"At that point, I was literally at my wit's end and I was desperately seeking answers and some type of escape from what was happening," Kole said. "But the priest was making sexual overtures. There was no escaping from it. All I wanted to do was to be a good monk."

Kole, who has not filed a lawsuit against the school or abbey, said he then attempted suicide. After he recovered, he was thrown out of the abbey.

THE SCHOOL'S LETTER

In the letter to the community, Cronin and Tidd say abbey monks were removed from their ministerial positions after St. Mary's officials learned of abuse allegations, barred from unsupervised contact with minors and had their activities and movements regulated by abbey officials.

As standards to keep children safe improved, abbey officials adopted them, the letter explains.

"These standards required stricter monitoring of accused monks and clearer policies for responding to abuse victims and preventing abuse among children and vulnerable adults. These best-practice standards of child protection remain in place today at Delbarton School and St. Mary's Abbey."

They added: "The payments for these settlements have been provided for by insurance coverage, and no donations to the School or Abbey, past or present, restricted or unrestricted, have been, or will be, used for settlements."

Cronin and Tidd continued, saying that the school and the abbey today have "robust policies and procedures, regularly reviewed by independent third-party experts, to ensure a safe and protective environment for our students and all to whom we minister."

Among those policies and procedures are "evaluations, fingerprinting and background checks of any candidates for the monastery and for employment at Delbarton School or St. Mary's Abbey.

"We also conduct annual training programs for all monks and employees of the Abbey and School on abuse prevention and informed responsiveness to claims of sexual abuse and harassment," Cronin and Tidd said in the letter.

Cronin and Tidd said the school will implement a child-safety webinar for all students starting in 2018-19, and incorporate safety-skills instruction including abuse-related education into the middle school health curriculum.

A RESPONSE

Greg Gianforcaro, the attorney who has represented the men who say they were abused, disputed Delbarton and St. Mary's claims that these institutions and the leaders of those institutions had treated their clients with "compassion."

"While I appreciate Abbot Cronin's alleged concern for the victims and agree with his statement that the victims are courageous, I strongly disagree with some of the claims that he made in his statement," he said.

"First, with respect to his assertion that Delbarton has treated these brave individuals with compassion," Gianforcaro continued, "I know firsthand that a request made by me on behalf of one of the courageous men to receive counseling was denied this request by a Delbarton representative."

He said Cronin's assertion that the victims have had "no restrictions" placed on their ability "to discuss their experiences" was patently false. He said Wolfe, who was abused by Brennan, was released from a confidentiality agreement only after years of litigation.

"In that respect, Delbarton and St. Mary's Abbey's claims that they are 'transparent' are, at the very least, misleading," Gianforcaro said.

The victims have sought four main things from Delbarton School and St. Mary's Abbey: acknowledgement of their abuse by clergy and staff; an actual apology; compensation, and a plan to prevent this from ever happening again. They'd also like to see the abbey separated from the school so that school donations aren't used to maintain and provide for the monks there.

"We simply want the truth to come out and that those who are responsible are held to account. It sounds so easy, doesn't it?" Kole said. "And that survivors should be treated with some empathy because without it you can't heal."

He added: "There is never closure when things like this happen to people. There's greater understanding, but there's never closure."

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