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Woman Accuses Friar of Abuse

Albany Ex-Resident of Home for Troubled Teens Files Suit in Federal Court

By Michele Morgan Bolton
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A Vermont woman who says she was sexually abused by a Franciscan friar when she lived in a Schenectady home for troubled teens is seeking \$4 million in damages and \$85,000 in reimbursed therapy expenses.

The lawsuit filed by attorney John Aretakis says the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany and the Franciscan Order of the Immaculate Conception knew since at least 1976 that the Rev. Ralph DiPasquale had molested children, yet he had intimate access to Teresa Mercon from 1979 to 1982.

Mercon's federal complaint names DiPasquale; WAITT House of Schenectady; Franciscan provincial minister, the Rev. Robert Campagna; Bishop Howard Hubbard; and the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese.

"The plaintiff and her family considered DiPasquale to be a fine priest and ... any attention shown by (him) was considered an honor," court papers said of Mercon, now 39. "She viewed (him) ... as a mentor and friend who would never do anything wrong or evil to hurt her."

DiPasquale lives in Florida and couldn't be reached for comment.

On Wednesday, diocesan spokesman Kenneth Goldfarb said he didn't know why Aretakis included the diocese in the suit. "We have no involvement except to refer the allegations to the Franciscan Order, which we did."

Campagna, in a phone interview from Manhattan, said he was aware of the allegations, which he said DiPasquale had "categorically denied."

"We met with these people in 2002 and did a pastoral outreach," Campagna said. "They certainly were not receptive."

WAITT Houses Inc., or We're All In This Together, once operated three group homes in Schenectady.

The organization was shut down in 1995 amid allegations of misappropriation of state Department of Social Services funds.

While the diocese says it has no involvement in the case, its lawyer Michael Costello asked a judge in a May 10 letter to move the federal proceeding from the Southern District in New York City to Albany.

"If Bishop Hubbard didn't support the bad priest, then why not just move to dismiss in New York City?" Aretakis asked. "I guess, once in Albany, they can put the hammer down and really destroy the case of Terry Mercon."

The Hartford, one of the Catholic diocese's insurance carriers, said in a May 24 letter to Costello that the alleged abuse did not occur within its policy period.

It also said the diocese breached accepted conditions because it knew of the pending litigation in

August 2002 but only notified the company on May 7.

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