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3 Men Accuse Priest of Abuse

By Jay Tokasz
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Jeffrey Mars vaguely remembers the simple pleasures of his first visit to the Rev. Robert O'Neill's cottage on the Chaumont River.

He and five other teenage boys fished, hiked and hung out with the cool priest who wore civilian clothes and was known as "Bob" to most adults.

Mars will never forget the second trip, which is burned into his brain in painful, awful detail.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," he says. "I would do anything to have those years back. I feel so cheated that that part of my life was spoiled."

Mars alleges in a lawsuit, scheduled to be filed in Rochester today, that O'Neill molested him at the cottage in the late 1970s. Two other men who say they were molested by O'Neill are also part of the suit, to be filed in State Supreme Court by lawyer Jeffrey Anderson.

The two other men - identified as John Doe 45 and John Doe 47 in the suit - spoke with the Democrat and Chronicle on the condition that their last names not be revealed.

Both O'Neill and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester declined to comment, although diocesan officials acknowledged in May that they were investigating complaints about O'Neill, who is retired.

Last month, the diocese stripped O'Neill of his priestly powers and privileges because of sexual abuse complaints. He can no longer participate in any ministry, wear clerical clothing or reside in parish or diocesan housing.

A dark privilege

It was considered a privilege to be asked to go on retreat with O'Neill, and usually three to six boys at a time were picked.

"It was exciting to be selected, to be able to go on this retreat. Within our parish, it had some religious benefits. It was an opportunity to pal around with friends," said Jim, one of the three accusers in the lawsuit, by phone from Orlando, Fla., where he now lives. He attended St. Boniface School as a youngster.

O'Neill was a charismatic personality who ingratiated himself with adults in the parish, Jim said. Parents trusted him like a member of the family and most did not raise questions about his taking teenage boys on retreats nearly three hours away, in the middle of nowhere.

The three men, who weren't with O'Neill at the cottage at the same time, all remembered the priest being a heavy drinker, sometimes stopping at a bar near the cottage and supplying alcohol to underage boys.

Mars said the night he was molested, O'Neill spiked his Coca-Cola with rum.

That cold Thanksgiving night, in 1978 or 1979, Mars was selected from among the other boys - he doesn't remember why or how - to sleep with O'Neill in his bed, he said.

"One of the things he told me was, 'I'm going to show you how soldiers keep warm in the Army,' " Mars said by phone from St. Petersburg, Fla.

Mars said he was 14 or 15 at the time and claims he was fondled repeatedly. "I was so scared and petrified. I don't recall trying to pull away. I recall not wanting to make a scene."

The rest of the weekend was a blur, he said, although nothing happened the second night when he was required to sleep with O'Neill again.

"I curled up in a ball . . . and got as close to the wall as possible," he said.

Mars didn't mention the incident until three or four years later, when he told his best friend, who had also been at the cottage.

O'Neill never again asked Mars to the cottage, he said.

Jim visited the cottage twice before he was chosen to sleep with O'Neill sometime in the winter of 1977, he said.

As he tried to sleep, he recalls twice having to push away O'Neill's groping arm. Jim also called out O'Neill's name, with no response, he said. The priest eventually did remove his hand from Jim's buttocks and genitals, he said.

"It was my belief he pretended to be sleeping," said Jim.

A few minutes later, Jim said he felt O'Neill's hand on his buttocks again. Jim then got out of bed, walked out of the cottage and finally came back in and sat on the toilet for the rest of the night, he said.

Adding to his humiliation, Jim was chosen the next morning for "open confession" with O'Neill, who allegedly dwelled on the topic of masturbation for most of the session.

"The other boys were told to go out and play," said Jim, who is now 41. "He asked some very inappropriate questions - if I masturbated, how many times I masturbated and how it felt."

'Roaming hands'

Masturbation was a common topic of conversation for O'Neill, his accusers say.

Paul, the third man in the lawsuit, remembers visiting the cottage twice, on midweek trips during the summer of 1978. He and his family were members of St. John the Evangelist Church.

Nothing extraordinary happened on the first trip, said Paul. But on the second trip, with two other boys, he said O'Neill requested that they all swim naked in the Chaumont River.

"He said, 'We don't swim in bathing suits around here. We go skinny dipping,' " said Paul, who is now 36 and lives in Monroe County.

O'Neill swam to what appeared to be a sand bar in the middle of the river and encouraged the boys to join him. But when they reached the area, none of the boys could touch the bottom. O'Neill, they discovered, was standing on a large drum in the deep water, and when the out-of-breath swimmers joined him on the drum, they were met by O'Neill's "roaming hands," said Paul.

"I just pushed away from him and started swimming toward shore," he said.

Paul refused to sleep in O'Neill's bedroom, although one of the other boys agreed, he said. He also declined O'Neill's invitation for confession in the woods. Both boys, whose names Paul can't remember, explained later - while O'Neill cooked dinner and the three boys were alone - that the priest had asked them whether they would "masturbate with him" during the confession, said Paul.

The next night, Paul again refused to sleep with O'Neill. While lying in a pull-out bed, he awoke in the middle of the night to discover the blanket removed and O'Neill rubbing his backside, he said.

O'Neill quickly returned to his bedroom when Paul became aware of what was happening, he said. The boys returned to Rochester the next day.

"On the way home, he said several times to all three of us, it was basically a threat - 'Don't tell your parents about any of this. They're not going to believe you.' "

Paul says he didn't tell anyone until about 10 years ago, when he opened up to his brother.

The Rev. Robert O'Neill

Ordained: June 2, 1962, Sacred Heart Cathedral. He is now 65 and retired.

Among his assignments:

1962: Assistant pastor, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Brockport.

1967: Assistant pastor, Holy Cross Church, Rochester.

1973: Diocesan Tribunal.

1987: Pastor, Church of the Annunciation, Rochester.

1998: Administrator, St. Christopher Church, Chili.

1999: Pastor, St. Christopher.

2001: Diocesan Tribunal.

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