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\$25,000 'Loaded Gun' Church Settles Abuse Claim With Addict, Who Then OD'd

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Raymond Trypuc was tired of so many things by the time he decided to call Msgr. Alan Placa, the man in charge of dealing with sexual abuse complaints against priests on Long Island.

He was tired of trying to shake his addiction to cocaine, tired of all the rules at the treatment center he walked out of in Arizona. Mostly, though, he was tired of trying to sort out why a trusted priest had abused him as a boy.

It was then, sometime after Nov. 16, 1993, that Trypuc got on the phone with Placa, the vice chancellor of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre, and struck a deal: For \$25,000, he absolved the church of any additional financial responsibility and agreed never to take his complaint public with a lawsuit.

Within weeks, Trypuc, 28, was dead of a cocaine overdose.

"Giving \$25,000 to an active addict is like putting a loaded gun in someone's hand," said Robert Fulton, an addictions counselor who knew Trypuc during his stay at the Arizona treatment center.

Placa said recently that he made the deal only after being advised to do so by Trypuc's own therapist.

"My recollection is that before I signed off, I insisted that we talk to the therapist," Placa said, "and he said it was in his [Trypuc's] best interests. He [Trypuc] had a profound need for closure. We were encouraged to do that."

But officials at both centers in Arizona that treated Trypuc in the months leading up to his death say their files don't reflect that, and they doubt it happened. "There's no way any treatment center is going to recommend a cash settlement for someone who's not in recovery," said Fulton, the assistant executive director of The Meadows, the facility that first treated Trypuc.

Last week, Placa did not return calls seeking comment on the discrepancy, and a spokeswoman from the diocese declined to comment.

The story of Trypuc's alleged abuse at the hands of the Rev. James Bergin, Trypuc's deep slide into drugs and homelessness, and his legal settlement with the diocese is expected to be one of the stories told to a special grand jury being convened in Suffolk County this week to probe how abuse allegations have been handled by the diocese.

The file on Bergin, who died in 1992, is one of more than two dozen pertaining to sexual abuse allegations against priests received by Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota as the result of a subpoena. But investigative sources have said the file they received contains no references to either the Trypuc case, or to that of another man who has said he was abused by Bergin, a red flag that the sources say will be closely reviewed.

The relationship between Bergin and the Trypuc family was long, complicated and, eventually, bitter, said Raymond Trypuc Sr.

"Jim Bergin and I were like brothers, maybe closer than brothers," Trypuc said. "The basic reason for letting Ray get involved with him was that I liked a lot of what Jimmy was doing. He had the ability to take Ray on ski trips. I said, Gee whiz, why not let Ray be exposed to this? After all, I was working two jobs."

Raymond Trypuc Sr. was a committed churchgoer at St. Francis de Sales in Patchogue when he first met Bergin around the late '70s. The priest often ate dinner at the Trypuc house, or the family would take him to dinner at a restaurant. Soon, Bergin took a keen interest in young Ray, then 11 or 12.

"Ray was an extremely sensitive child at that age," his father said. "He liked art, he liked to paint. He was a little different."

In addition to ski trips, the boy frequently visited Bergin in his rectory bedroom, the father said.

While his son's relationship with Bergin seemed perfectly normal, he said this belief was shattered several years later when a friend called him.

"The friend said, 'Are you having trouble with Bergin?'" Trypuc Sr. recalled. "I said, 'No, what's the problem?' My friend said Bergin had made a move on one of his sons. I said that was a very serious charge, and I told him I'd ask my son.

"I went to talk to Ray and he broke down. He told me that it had gone on for two years, masturbation mostly. But it may have been more."

Trypuc Sr. then called Bergin, who at that time was pastor at St. John's in Riverhead, and told him to come to the house. "He broke down and cried when I told him," he said. "He flat out admitted it. Bergin went in Ray's room and apologized to him. As he was coming out of his room - and you know I will always remember this - he said, 'I hope something good can come out of this now that it's finally out in the open.'

"We agreed he would not be arrested. I said to him, 'If you turn yourself in to the diocese, if they call and say you are getting treatment and will never again be involved with children, I will be satisfied.'

"The next day," Trypuc Sr. said, "a nun calls and said, 'I am calling you in regard to Jim Bergin.' She said he had turned himself in for treatment. He had admitted to the problem. I asked about my son, and she gave me the name of a therapist.

"I never got involved with Bergin again. We severed the relationship completely."

Unbeknownst to the Trypuc family, however, there was another alleged victim of Bergin.

Larry Groelinger, now an Air Force reserve officer in Maryland, has told Newsday he was abused by Bergin as a student at St. Pius X High School in Uniondale. Both allegations were reported to diocesan officials in the early 1980s, according to Trypuc's family and Groelinger.

Groelinger said he reported the abuse to Msgr. Thomas Malloy and Suffolk's then-auxiliary bishop, the Rev. Gerald Ryan.

Malloy, in an interview, confirmed that he spoke with Groelinger; Ryan is dead. Meanwhile, both Raymond Trypuc Sr. and Groelinger have recently been interviewed by investigators from the district attorney's office.

While Groelinger succeeded in his life and career, forward movement was difficult for Ray Trypuc Jr. His father said he went to a therapist, but only once. After he graduated from Patchogue-Medford High School in 1983, he enlisted in the Army.

Two years later, Ray returned to Patchogue, moving back into his parents' home. Soon, the father said, money was missing and, in 1989, after much prodding from his father, Trypuc admitted that he

had a cocaine problem.

To fight it, Trypuc went to rehab at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Northport.

"He tried to get better," the father said. "He wanted to have that monkey off his back. He came home and I thought he had a grip on it. Then a few months later, he calls one night and said he was going to shoot himself. He ended up back in Northport."

At some point for his therapy, the father recalled, his son went to a cemetery in Suffolk County and stood at Bergin's grave.

"He wrote a letter to Bergin," he said. "He put it on his grave. Bergin was at the bottom of all of this. It was all about trying to get the damage fixed ... He was a wonderful boy. But he was sliding downhill, in and out of rehab." The father tried to help his son with a policy of "tough love," but realized he was living on the streets, eating out of trash cans.

"Then," he said, "he stumbled into Hope House."

A residential home for troubled youth run by the Rev. Francis Pizzarelli, Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson also operates a homeless shelter for young men, the Pax Christi Hospitality Center. That center took in Trypuc in the summer of 1993, and tried to help him straighten out his life.

"I remember him very well," said Roger Croteau, a Catholic Brother with the Congregation of the Holy Cross who befriended Trypuc at Pax Christi.

"He had a drug and alcohol problem. I kept asking him what was the problem, what started all this. Finally he said he was abused by a local priest. I said, 'Do you want me to help you deal with this?' He said yes." At that point, Croteau said, he called the diocese and spoke with Placa, who came out the next day to talk to Ray.

"He made arrangements for Ray to get treatment in Arizona," he said.

In Arizona, Trypuc checked into The Meadows, a primary care facility he attended for 35 days at a cost to the diocese of \$17,500, according to an accounting supplied to his father after Trypuc's death.

He then moved into Prescott House, where he was placed in a three-month treatment program designed to get him ready to move back into the community. However, by mid-November, Trypuc had signed himself out of the program against the advice of his therapists, according to John Valentine, who was executive director of the Prescott House when Trypuc was there, who discussed Trypuc's case only after receiving a signed release from Trypuc's father.

Prescott House rules forbade him from being involved with women, Valentine explained, and Trypuc had begun dating a local woman.

The next time staff members heard about him, he had been found dead in an apartment he had moved into the week before. A medical examiner ruled the death was from "cocaine toxicity."

Officials at both The Meadows and Prescott House said last week they had been against Trypuc dropping out of treatment. There was no evidence they talked with church officials about a settlement.

"No one from Prescott House ever discussed settlement issues or the legality of the case regarding Ray Trypuc Jr. ... ever," added Valentine. "Ray signed things at a time when he was not capable."

Fulton, of The Meadows facility - who was a priest in the Diocese of Rockville Centre before leaving the priesthood in 1997 and moving to Arizona - said he complained directly to both Placa and then-Bishop John McGann about how Trypuc was handled, but they didn't respond.

Pizzarelli, Hope House's founder, said the funeral Mass. "I loved the family," Pizzarelli said. "I am not saying had Ray stayed with us that we would not have made a misstep. But I surely would not have

handled it the way it was. It should have been handled legally and criminally.

"The way it was handled," he added, "was just reckless."

Now living in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Ray Trypuc's parents say they are still suffering with the pain of their son's death, and the anger over the settlement. And they wrestle with their faith.

Raymond Trypuc Sr., said last week that he wrote Placa after his son's funeral. Referring to the settlement between Placa and his son, "I told him he was my son's last enabler," he said, "and therefore partially responsible for his death."

"So much was lost," he said. "The Raymond before Bergin - that's the boy I want back."

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