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'For All the Other Children'

By Joseph Mallia
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One is an airline pilot who grew up in Northport and now lives in Nevada. Three others live and work on Long Island, as a convenience store clerk, a truck driver, an advertising executive. Each went public yesterday for the first time to say that he had been sexually molested, as a boy, by a Catholic priest of the Rockville Centre Diocese.

And each of the four talked about why he, along with 30 other men, filed lawsuits yesterday accusing the diocese of failing to protect them, and of defrauding them.

"I want to really take them to task for what happened, not just for myself but for all the other children who were hurt," said Russell Squelch, 55, a Northwest Airlines pilot who spoke in a telephone interview from Reno, where he lives with his wife and three children.

Several of the men said they were financially comfortable and were not trying to make money by publicly saying they'd been sodomized or molested by a priest. They said they hoped their actions would help protect other children from abuse.

Squelch said he was molested for three years in the 1960s, beginning when he was 10 years old, by the Rev. Richard Schaefer at St. Philip Neri Church in Northport, at St. Sylvester Church in Medford, and on trips to Coney Island, Jones Beach and Washington, D.C. He said the priest also molested five other boys before a group of parents complained and Schaefer was transferred. Squelch's lawyers said yesterday they have been unable to locate Schaefer.

Years later when Squelch asked the diocese for help, his telephone call was put through to Msgr. Alan Placa, a lawyer who headed the diocese Office of Legal Affairs and handled sexual abuse complaints, Squelch said. "He was evasive. He told me, 'Nobody else is complaining about this. Why can't you handle it?'" he recalled.

Placa told him the diocese didn't owe him any assistance, but eventually agreed to pay for 10 counseling sessions, Squelch said.

Squelch said he was not called to testify about Schaefer before a Suffolk grand jury that issued a scathing report in February on the diocese. Newsday's attempts to reach Schaefer for comment yesterday were unsuccessful.

A half-dozen of the plaintiffs appeared yesterday with their lawyers, Michael G. Dowd of Manhattan and Melanie Little of Garden City. Two said they were abused by the Rev. Eugene Vollmer, a priest at St. Joseph's Church in Ronkonkoma. A third said he was abused by Vollmer about five years later after Vollmer was transferred to St. Thomas the Apostle in West Hempstead. Vollmer could not be reached for comment.

"For years the church got high-powered lawyers to squash the little people. We are not here for money, we just want the victims to be taken care of," Joseph Russo, 40, of Suffolk County, said.

"So far the church is still in denial, still won't admit it. I just want to see big changes. To see it looked into immediately, handled directly and not covered up," said Russo, a truck driver. Vollmer was moved

from parish to parish seven times in 25 years. He was suspended by Bishop William Murphy in March 2002 after a Newsday report.

One of the accusers, John Salveson of Philadelphia, brought his teenage daughter with him to a news conference announcing the lawsuits. "I'm really proud of him," said Kate Salveson, 18. "It's so hard for him to do this."

Another plaintiff in the lawsuits, Brian Compasso, 42, of Ronkonkoma, said he wasn't concerned about financially crippling the diocese. "Can't hurt the richest organization in the world," said Compasso, a convenience store clerk who said he is recovering from drug and alcohol abuse.

"The only way to hurt them is to make the charge public again and again," Compasso said. "They have heard it from lawyers and government officials, they are not hearing from people who are living with it."

Louis Martino, 34, of West Hempstead, an account executive at a direct marketing firm, said he was abused by Brother Howard Murphy, who was a teacher at his high school, St. Mary's in Manhasset. Martino said he went on an overnight trip to West Point with the teacher, who unzipped his sleeping bag and sodomized him. Brother Murphy could not be reached yesterday.

Martino said money was not his goal. "I have a good life, a good job, a good career," Martin said. "The public awareness has to be raised. You can't trust these people."

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