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Finally, They Listened

Atlanta school heeds warning of abuse victim

By Shirley E. Perlman
Newsday
April 12, 2002

Last summer, John Salveson received an e-mail from a friend he hadn't heard from in 20 years. "The message," he recalled, "was something like, 'I remember what happened to you in Oyster Bay and I thought you'd want to know this.'"

The e-mail included a link to the Marist School in Atlanta, where, Salveson soon discovered, Robert Huneke was working as a guidance counselor with high school students.

At that point, Salveson, now 46, did what he's been doing for two decades: He wrote a letter. This time, it was to the Marist School, saying that Huneke, a former priest who worked on Long Island, had sexually abused him for seven years, starting when Salveson was 13. For Salveson, the letter was just one more step in an ongoing mission he's been on since 1980.

It is a mission that's included two letters to the Diocese of Rockville Centre; a protest outside St. Patrick's Church in Huntington, where he distributed an open letter and fliers that said, "If you are not aware of Father Huneke's history of sexual abuse you should read this letter"; a letter to a diocese in Florida where Huneke was transferred; and, finally, the letter to the Marist School in Georgia.

After years of disappointment, Salveson didn't expect much from Marist, he said. This time, however, would be different. "They did the right thing," he said.

What they did was to quickly send out a letter to parents advising them of their concern, even though Huneke had been only a temporary one-year hire and was already gone. They made counseling available and fired the head of guidance, Huneke's wife, Regina, a former nun who served on Long Island. And when they heard Huneke was about to be hired elsewhere, they alerted the employer, officials there said.

It was, Salveson said, the type of response that's been lacking from Catholic leaders since his mission began. Because of that, he says, he is strongly supportive of legislation that will force clergy to report sexual misconduct to law enforcement so that those clerics who have molested children will be identified on a central sex-abuse registry.

Church officials, Salveson says, "act as if by saying they're sorry, they're done. ... Well, that's not enough. The people at the diocese who put me through this are still at the diocese."

Joanne Novarro, a spokeswoman for the diocese, declined to comment, noting diocese policy not to discuss individual priests. Meanwhile, Huneke, 61, who lives in an Atlanta suburb, and his wife have been unavailable for comment. Former associates say they believe he is working at home.

In a recent interview, Salveson looked back on his struggle with the church. He said he first accused Huneke in a letter to Bishop John McGann dated Feb. 13, 1980, two years after graduating from University of Notre Dame. "I am writing this letter for one reason," he wrote. "I feel a responsibility to those young boys who may be approached sexually by Father Huneke. I feel that giving you this information is the best way to prevent another person from having an experience similar to mine."

He told McGann, who has since died, that Huneke was often intoxicated during the abuse, which he

said began on a weekend trip when Salveson was a high school freshman and continued during Salveson's time at Notre Dame, where Huneke was pursuing a graduate degree.

The diocese, he said, didn't respond.

After three months, Salveson wrote a second time and, finally, in a letter dated Aug. 1 1980, McGann said he had raised "the matter of our mutual concern" with Huneke, who at that time was working at Christ the King Parish in Tampa, Fla.

McGann, said Huneke, "acknowledged his responsibility" in a letter that was forwarded to Salveson some months later. In that letter, provided to Newsday by Salveson, Huneke thanked McGann for his understanding "in regard to the past incidents we discussed" and wrote that he was "truly sorry" for any harm he caused.

"As I told you," the letter continued, "I have undergone counseling as well as spiritual direction and will continue both and feel that there will be no recurrence of such incidents." No reference is made to the nature of the incidents.

Instead of mollifying him, the correspondence prompted him to take further action, Salveson said. He wrote to the bishop of the Florida diocese, who wrote him back saying he had no knowledge of any allegations and would look into it.

Salveson said he then took a break.

He married, began having children, and moved to Pennsylvania. "I did not have the emotional or physical energy to continue to pursue this issue," he said. "But I never felt OK about the fact that Huneke could still be sexually abusive and, maybe, nothing was being done about it."

In 1988, his conscience still nagging at him, Salveson considered a lawsuit, but he learned the statute of limitations had run out. The next year, he hired a private detective, discovered that Huneke was working as a priest back on Long Island, and decided to go public. Salveson, his father and brothers drew coverage from two TV stations and two New York tabloids for handing out the fliers at St. Patrick's. "There was a near riot," Salveson recalled.

He was summoned by the Rockville diocese for a meeting with "furious" church officials and, soon afterwards, he said, he learned that Huneke left the diocese rather than submit to a psychiatric evaluation.

That might have been the end of things for him, he said, but in 1993, his anger welled up again when he saw an article in Newsday quoting a church official saying no incidents of sexual abuse had ever been reported to the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

"I called the reporter and said 'Yo, how about me?'" he said.

He also determined at that time, he said, that two other classmates at St. Dominic's High School had been abused by Huneke, as well. In a telephone interview with Newsday last week, one of the men, a 46-year-old professional with two children, said Huneke had a sexually abusive relationship with him that started when he was 15 and continued until he was about 21.

That individual, who asked not to be identified, said he reported the abuse to the diocese in 1989, prompted by Salveson's protest outside St. Patrick's.

Regarding Huneke's latest stop in Georgia, the Rev. Richmond Egan, president of the Marist School, said Salveson's disclosure alarmed him. He said the school immediately called the Diocese of Rockville Centre to verify Huneke had been a priest, something he had never told them.

Then, he said, they confronted Huneke's wife, who had been serving as the school's director of guidance since 1997, and terminated her contract because, Egan said, "She knew about the accusations and never told us." Parents were asked to notify school officials of anything untoward,

Egan added, but no complaints have been reported. "We dodged a bullet," Egan said.

Salveson, meanwhile, says it's that kind of aggressive response that's needed if children are to be protected.

"I want to make clear that I have no idea if Huneke is still sexually abusive," Salveson said. "All I'm saying is somebody with his history of sex abuse should never have contact with young people."

His Letter Campaign:

How John Salveson raised his abuse allegations

Feb. 13, 1980: John Salveson writes to Bishop John McGann, saying, when he was in high school, Robert Huneke sexually abused him.

May 19: Salveson writes to McGann again after getting no response.

June 25: McGann agrees to meet with Salveson. In the meeting, Salveson describes his ordeal and raises concern about the possibility of Huneke abusing others.

July 7: McGann sends Huneke letter requesting a meeting.

Aug. 1: In letter to Salveson, McGann describes the meeting he had with Huneke.

Sept. 2: Salveson writes back, requesting proof Huneke has been treated. He wants to know whether McGann has related his concerns to the Florida diocese that oversees the parish Huneke is assigned to.

Jan. 12, 1981: Salveson writes McGann again after getting no response to his previous letter.

Feb. 2: McGann responds, saying there is no proof Huneke abused other victims. He encloses a copy of a letter in which Huneke apologizes to McGann. In that letter, Huneke states, without specifically mentioning the nature of the incidents, "I am writing to thank you for your openness and understanding in regard to the past incidents we discussed. I deeply regret the incidents and am truly sorry for any harm caused."

Feb. 23: Salveson writes McGann again asking for proof that Huneke has been treated.

April 15: McGann responds he's spoken with Huneke's counselor, stating, "I feel that Father has overcome the situation which you had brought to my attention." He says he will not contact the Florida diocese.

June 8: Salveson writes back, "I am, to say the least, disappointed and disillusioned." He states he'll contact the Florida diocese himself.

Aug. 7: Salveson writes the diocese's bishop, W. Thomas Larkin, to inform him of the situation.

Summer, 2001: After receiving a tip from a friend that Huneke was working as a high school guidance counselor in Atlanta, Salveson writes to the school, presenting his concerns. The school sends letters warning parents and fires Huneke's wife, Regina, a former nun, who was the school's head of guidance.

GRAPHIC: 1) Newsday Photo/Thomas A. Ferrara - John Salveson. 2) Photo - Robert Huneke. Newsday Chart/Gustavo Pabon - His Letter Campaign (see end of text)