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School Counselor Quit amid Allegation

30-Year-Old Sex Accusation Led Ex-Priest to Leave Liverpool Guidance Post

By Renee K. Gadoua
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The Liverpool school district threatened to fire a longtime guidance counselor last year after learning he was accused of sexually abusing teen-age girls 30 years ago when he was a priest at a Utica Catholic school.

Donald J. Crosby denied the accusations to Liverpool school officials but resigned from the district in June, within two weeks of being confronted with the allegations, said Dennis O'Hara, a lawyer representing the district.

Crosby, 68, died Jan. 2 of natural causes, according to the Onondaga County Medical Examiner's Office.

Valerie Radzisz, 45, of Rochester, said she told Crosby's supervisor, Monsignor H. Charles Sewall, of the alleged abuse in 1974. It's unclear whether Sewall, who years later admitted he sexually abused a teen-age boy, reported the allegations to his superiors. Diocese officials say Crosby's file does not include any record of a complaint to Sewall.

Sewall provided a recommendation for Crosby when he applied for a job as guidance counselor several years later, O'Hara said.

Radzisz said her mother informed the diocese of the allegations during the 1990s and said Sewall knew about the incidents. Diocesan officials said they had no record of that complaint either.

Diocesan officials said Radzisz told them of the allegations in 2002; Liverpool school district officials said they learned of the allegations from the Oneida County District Attorney's Office in 2003.

Radzisz said she is not interested in suing the diocese. She said the diocese's victim assistance coordinator, Teresa Secreti, contacted her in January and offered to pay for counseling and an opportunity to meet with the bishop.

Radzisz has not yet accepted the offers. She said she appreciates the diocese's effort to reach out to her.

"I do believe it was sincere," she said.

She said she came forward when she learned in May 2002 that Sewall publicly admitted sexually abusing a teen-age boy in the 1970s.

Sewall is one of 16 priests the Syracuse Diocese has permanently removed from ministry in the last two years because of credible allegations of sexual abuse. The diocese paid an undisclosed amount of money in 1988 to settle a sexual abuse case against Sewall. In July 2002, three men each filed \$20 million lawsuits against Sewall and the diocese, accusing him of sexually abusing them in the 1970s.

Sewall is out of town and could not be reached for comment.

Crosby retired in June after about 25 years at Soule Road Middle School. District officials said he was

well respected and no one had accused him of misconduct during his career in Liverpool.

Michael Arcuri, Oneida County's district attorney, said although the statute of limitations had run out on any possible criminal charges, his office found credible complaints by Radzisz and at least three other women. When investigators learned Crosby was working with children, Arcuri said he felt the school district should be informed about the allegations.

Arcuri said it's impossible to know if Crosby would have been found guilty in the 1970s.

"It never got to law enforcement," he said. "If it had been reported, things may have been very different."

He said the case underscores his support for a change in state law to require clergy and church officials to report allegations of sexual abuse. He also supports a possible extension of the statute of limitations.

While state law does not require clergy to report allegations of sexual abuse involving a minor, the Syracuse Diocese's policy is to report current cases to civil authorities.

John Cataldo, who retired in June after 10 years as Liverpool superintendent, said the district handled the case appropriately.

"What he did or didn't do 30 years ago I can't tell you," said Cataldo, who was named superintendent of Syracuse's Catholic schools in October. "I can tell you when allegations came, we dug in, and we treated them seriously."

Cataldo did not know what policies the district followed when it reviewed Crosby's background. He said Crosby had a positive record at Liverpool.

Pete Scalise, an investigator with the Oneida County District Attorney's Office, said Radzisz and another woman signed depositions describing abuse by Crosby. He said he interviewed at least two other women who described similar incidents.

"He would invite them back to his room, and it would start with touching," Scalise said. "It would have been something we would have investigated more and gone forward with the prosecution if we knew at the time."

The Syracuse Diocese confirmed that Crosby was ordained in 1963 and left the priesthood in 1975. His personnel file includes no complaints about misconduct during the time he was a priest, said Danielle Cummings, communications director for the diocese. She could not provide information about why he left the priesthood. Crosby voluntarily requested laicization, which was accepted in 1980, she said.

Cummings said the time elapsed since the alleged incidents and the fact that Crosby is dead and unable to defend himself make it unfair to publicize the allegations.

She said diocesan officials have no knowledge of Radzisz's conversation with Sewall in the 1970s.

Radzisz said she told Sewall, then principal of Utica Catholic Academy, about the alleged abuse, which she said occurred in the guidance office during school hours.

Sewall told her Crosby admitted abusing her and other girls, wrote Radzisz, whose last name at the time was Tibbits.

"Msgr. Sewall assured me he would inform the Syracuse diocese, they would take care of it," she said in a letter sent to Scalise and the diocese in May 2002.

She said Sewall recommended she not take the accusations to the police.

"Father said they would call me a hussy and it would ruin my reputation," Radzisz said during a telephone interview from her Rochester home. "Monsignor Sewall said he took care of it with the diocese. He said Father would go to confession."

Radzisz said she attempted suicide twice and was unable to attend school during most of her senior year because of mental health problems. She graduated in 1976.

Radzisz is married and has two children. She worked as a licensed practical nurse for many years and is now retired. She said learning of Sewall's admission about sexually abusing a minor felt like betrayal.

"Up until that moment I considered him my mentor," she said. "He performed my wedding."

She and Bernard Radzisz married May 26, 1979, at Our Lady of the Rosary, New Hartford.

Radzisz said she had not seen Crosby since 1974. She said shortly after she contacted the diocese in May 2002, a diocesan official called to tell her Crosby had left the priesthood. The Oneida County District Attorney's Office informed her in October 2002 that he was a school guidance counselor. She learned Crosby had died when she read his obituary in the newspaper.

Radzisz said she was especially troubled to learn Crosby was working with young people. The district's action provided some vindication of her concerns, she said.

She supplied a copy of a letter from O'Hara, the district's lawyer.

"We confronted Mr. Crosby with your accusations and informed him that proceedings would be commenced to terminate his employment unless he decided to resign," the Aug. 4, 2003, letter says.

"The District's Superintendent, Janice Matousek, has also forwarded a report regarding Mr. Crosby to the New York State Office of Teaching," the letter continued. "Under the circumstances, Mr. Crosby will never again be employed as a counselor in a school district within the State of New York."

Matousek, who took over as Liverpool superintendent in June, did not return several phone calls.

Timeline

Donald J. Crosby, a longtime guidance counselor at a Liverpool school, resigned in June after being confronted about sexually abusing a teen-age girl 30 years ago.

1963: Crosby is ordained and serves at St. Mary Church in Cleveland, Oswego County; and St. Matthew Church in East Syracuse.

1969: Crosby begins working at Utica Catholic Academy, an all-girls school that merges with co-educational Notre Dame High School in 1977.

1974: Valerie Tibbits, then 15, tells Monsignor H. Charles Sewall, principal, that Crosby sexually abused her. At the end of the school year, Crosby is reassigned and named diocesan director of religious instruction for Syracuse public schools.

1975: Crosby resigns from the priesthood.

1979: Sewall presides at the wedding of Valerie Tibbits and Bernard Radzisz.

1980: Crosby's voluntary request for laicization is accepted. By then, he was working as a guidance counselor in the Liverpool school district.

May 2002: Valerie Radzisz sees media accounts in which Sewall admits he sexually abused a male student in the 1970s. She contacts the Syracuse Diocese and the Oneida County District Attorney's Office to report her allegations against Crosby and her conversation with Sewall.

June 2003: The Oneida County district attorney contacts Liverpool school officials, who threaten to fire Crosby. He resigns within two weeks.

Jan. 2: Crosby, 68, dies of natural causes.

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