

Opinion

Steve Israel: Real heroes of archdiocese sex abuse scandal — the victims

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Imagine that you're just a child, maybe 11, 12, 13 years old. You're sexually abused by the man your family reveres so much — a priest — that they want you to be a priest like him. They've invited him for dinner, let him take you to Rye Playland and even let you spend the night at the rectory — where the priest abuses you.

For years you keep that terrible secret bottled up. After all, who's going to take the word of a kid over the word of a priest?

But you start hearing that other priests are abusing other kids. They're kids with families for whom the priests are such a big part of their lives that they let them take their sons on overnight trips to the Jersey shore. One family even gives one of those abusive priests a T-shirt that says "Trust Me, I'm a Father."

You finally get the courage to speak the truth and face one of the most powerful institutions around, the Archdiocese of New York. You say that one of its priests is sexually abusing you.

The priest denies it, stands behind his white collar and says, "You're ruining my life as a priest." You don't yet know that he's been accused of abuse by other boys in other parishes. You don't yet know what you and your family will soon learn — just by asking other boys — that he's abused others in your parish and the Catholic school where he teaches.

You just know that church officials say it's your word against his.

"And who's going to believe you? He's a priest and I'm just a kid," says Port Jarvis' Patrick Westfall, who was abused in the 1970s by the late former priest Francis Stinner.

When word gets out that you're accusing the priest of abuse, other church members don't believe you. They accuse you and your family of attacking the church they love and where your family has worshiped for years.

This is what happened to Westfall. He was one of dozens of local boys who were victims of former priests like the late Edward Pipala and Stinner of Orange County — priests who were defrocked years after the abuse was first reported only because these boys and their families had the courage to speak out.

That's why Westfall and the other victims of the 120 priests, bishops and deacons credibly accused of abuse in a report by the Archdiocese of New York are the heroes of that long overdue list — a list that still doesn't include clergy from other orders who worked in archdiocese schools or churches.

Without them, these clergy — at least seven of whom were local — may have continued their abuse.

But no public list or monetary settlement will heal the scars of the abuse that may sear some of their souls forever.

They're scars that cut so deep that some victims turned to drugs like heroin or even committed suicide.

Some victims were consumed by so much hate that when a man who was abused by Pipala heard there was a homicide in Mount Vernon where the former priest lived after prison, the victim hoped Pipala was the one killed.

When one formerly devout father of a victim sat down for dinner and his family said a pre-meal prayer, he wouldn't join them.

As one victim of Pipala said years ago:

"He got seven years, we got life."

These victims of sexual abuse by the men they and their families revered are the real heroes, these boys who had the courage to stand up and speak painful truth to a power that did not really hear them until it was too late.

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