

A Brave Face

by Maureen Turner
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The sheer number of abuse charges filed against Catholic priests in recent years has had the sad effect of making the victims seem almost like a faceless, indistinguishable mass. And the ways in which their stories are revealed -- sound-bite stories of decades-old crimes, many committed by men who are now retired, perhaps even dead -- can allow an already overwhelmed public the comfort of some psychological distance.

But there's no comfort for the victims, the very real people who had very real atrocities committed against them by people who were long considered beyond reproach. Phil Saviano knows this all too well: four decades ago, as a young boy in the small town of East Douglas, Mass., he was sexually abused, he says, by his pastor, the Rev. David Holley. Like many victims, Saviano felt scared and ashamed, and he kept his mouth shut. The abuse ended when Holley was transferred from the parish without explanation.

Years later, as an adult, Saviano picked up the newspaper and saw that Holley had been arrested for molesting kids at another parish in New Mexico. It was one of a number of cases making news in the early 90s, when the first wave of the priest-abuse scandal broke. And it prompted Saviano to begin dealing with what had happened to him all those years ago -- talking to his family, his therapist, and the media. (See *Telling Secrets*, Dec. 19, 2002, www.valleyadvocate.com.)

Saviano filed suit against the Worcester diocese, which, after years of legal wrangling, settled his case in 1996. The next year, he founded the New England chapter of the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, or SNAP.

An eloquent, moving speaker, Saviano uses his personal story to highlight troubling questions about how the church hierarchy allowed so many abusive priests access to kids for so long. He uses it to remind others who've gone through similar experiences that they are not alone. And he uses it to show the rest of us that the vast sea of abuse victims is actually populated by real individuals, deserving of respect and support and justice.

Phil Saviano will speak at the UMass Campus Center, room 168C, on Tuesday, April 5, at 7 p.m. as part of the Everywoman's Center's Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Other events include a Wounded Heart Walking Tour, a display throughout downtown Amherst of wooden hearts created by abuse survivors; an April 21 workshop for survivors; and a Take Back the Night March and Rally on April 28. For more info., call 413-545-0883 (TTY/Voice) or see www.umass.edu/ewc