

May 30, 2007 - Abuse cases settled: Chicago archdiocese paying \$6.6 million in suits involving 12 priests

By Manya A. Brachear, Chicago Tribune religion reporter

Kathy Laarveld thought that by working at her son Keith's Catholic elementary school she could shield him from danger and guarantee him a happy childhood.

But in 2003 her adult son shared horrifying news: At his 8th birthday party and celebration of his First Communion, Rev. Vincent McCaffrey had molested him inside the Laarvelts' home. The abuse, he said, continued for four years behind closed doors just steps away from his mother's desk at St. Joseph the Worker School in Wheeling.

"I would rather have died than let this happen to my son," Kathy Laarveld said through tears at a news conference Tuesday. "I was there. It was done in my home. It was done in my place of work. Now I know a true predator knows how to play the game."

On Tuesday, Keith Laarveld, 33, and 14 other plaintiffs announced a series of settlements with the Chicago archdiocese and a dozen current and former priests, reached since March 2006 and totaling more than \$6.65 million. One plaintiff will receive about \$2.3 million.

The settlements covered abuse as early as 1962 and as late as 1989, with most of the abuse taking place during the 1970s, said archdiocese spokeswoman Susan Burritt. All 12 priests named have been removed from public ministry or have died, she said. Of the 15 plaintiffs who brought suits, one has committed suicide.

The 12 priests -- current and former -- named in the settlement include Joseph Fitzharris of Chicago; Robert Mayer and Robert Craig, both of Lake Villa; Joseph Kissane of Mt. Prospect, and Walter Huppenbauer of Palatine. It also named Norbert Maday and McCaffrey, who are in prison, and William O'Brien, who lives in archdiocesan housing. Three priests -- Ken Ruge, Robert Becker and Leonard Kmak -- are dead. Peter McNamara's location is unknown.

Keith Laarveld, an operations manager from Hoffman Estates, said that although he had written about the abuse in diaries and journals, he had never admitted it out loud, even during therapy after trying to take his own life. He came forward after seeing a schoolmate on television who had sued McCaffrey, and he told his wife before approaching his parents.

"I battle my inner demons every day still," Laarveld said. "It's important that I hold the archdiocese to some level of accountability. I had to do this for myself and for those who have yet to come forward."

Kathy Laarveld credits therapy and medicine for helping her family cope. Her son's journals, she said, reveal "the heart and soul of someone who is totally destroyed."

Burritt said the archdiocese has paid more than \$51.8 million to 214 people who have brought sexual abuse allegations. "The archdiocese always takes any claims of sexual misconduct seriously and encourages anyone to come forward who may have been abused by a priest, deacon, religious or lay employee of the archdiocese," Burritt said.

Attorney Jeff Anderson said his office plans to offer pro bono assistance to people who wish to pursue further legal action against accused priests, such as locating and suing the men and working to alert the community where the defendants now live.

"Some victims feel that further exposing their perpetrators will be positive for the public and positive for themselves," Anderson said. "In nearly every clergy molestation case, both the individual and his supervisors are sued. But in nearly every case, once a settlement is achieved with the diocese or employer, the case is over."