

May 9, 2007 - The other side of paradise [Bishop Soens Accused]

By Margaret Poe and Mason Kerns, The Daily Iowan

Through court documents and interviews with accusers and witnesses, The Daily Iowan has re-examined the annals of alleged sexual abuse by former Iowa City Catholic priest Lawrence Soens, who served as principal of Regina High School from 1958-67. Soens, now 80 years old and facing civil claims brought by 14 former students, denies all wrongdoing, as do Regina faculty, secretaries, and students who support the former principal.

In 1983, Soens was named bishop of the Sioux City Diocese by Pope John Paul II; he has since retired. The DI has discovered that many students - even non-accusers - believe 'everyone knew abuse was going on.' In the second article looking at Soens' reported transgressions, the DI investigates that contention and highlights the changes 40 years have brought to Catholic schools.

L.D. is a queer / a stinking queer is he / when he is walking down the hall / he will pinch your tit with glee

Renowned clergy-abuse psychologist Richard Sipe, who evaluated Lawrence Soens' tenure at Regina High School and the subsequent allegations of abuse, found that Regina students often chanted this song on school-bus rides.

In anti-gay vernacular more accepted at the time, the students may have been referring to Soens' common practice of "purpling" - or twisting boys' nipples to induce a purple bruise. While sometimes painful, the practice was considered more playful than sexual by most students.

But through interviews, the psychologist determined that some of the children's language revealed more serious offenses. When students emerged from the principal's office, Sipe reported that peers would ask, "Did he queer you?" - suggesting that students knew Soens fondled boys behind closed doors.

Several interviews point to Regina faculty and staff's inability or unwillingness to intercede against Soens' alleged actions.

In his testimony, anonymous Regina Student No. 10 - one of many former students who have sued Soens, the diocese, and Regina for damages stemming from the alleged abuse - said one would "have to be blind and just not paying attention to be [at Regina] for two weeks and not know what was going on." He would later say, "You found this out on the school bus going to school when you were in ninth grade: Watch out for him."

A confidential diocese report that is now a piece of evidence in the Soens cases indicates that accounts of abuse may have been swirling around the school, either during Soens' tenure or after, while the former principal was promoted up the diocesan ladder and as bishop of Sioux City. The report states that during a diocesan investigation, Father Ken Kuntz, a pastor at St. Mary's in Iowa City, "reluctantly relayed a story he heard third-hand about a boy who went into Fr. Soens' office to get his brother, and Fr. Soens grabbed at his crotch."

A variant of the phrase "watch out for L.D." - short for Lawrence Donald (Soens) - arose in numerous interviews. Cynthia Seelman, a 1968 Regina graduate who filed an affidavit supporting the accusers, told the DI that abuse was rampant.

"There was no morality, no one to defend [students], no one who would listen," she said.

Seelman, who was not a victim, said she frequently discussed Soens' advances on Regina males with her brother, brother-in-law, sister, and boyfriend at the time.

"Every student in the school knew what was going on," said Seelman, who now lives in Cosgrove, Iowa.

She also recounted the experiences of two brothers - two of her best friends in the school - whose names the DI has chosen to keep confidential.

"[They] had both been called into the 'sick room' - Soens would fondle students and ask, 'Do you feel better?' - and groped while in there," she said. "Maybe it was because, I don't know, maybe it's because they had lost their father [to death] that Soens picked on them.

"But honestly, it seems like everybody I knew was being approached, like he was trying to get a piece of everyone. Well, I saw their mother go into [Soens'] office and make it known to everybody that she knew they'd been abused."

Seelman said there was no immediate action, but Soens was gone not long after the boys' mother confronted the principal. Records indicate he was promoted by the diocese to a position in the seminary at St. Ambrose University, in Davenport, where he would again be accused of molestation.

"They told us in school that 'Father Soens had just gone away for a rest,' " Seelman said. "Of course, we knew [the truth], but I guess they were finally like, 'We don't care if he's a priest.' It's not like he can do no wrong."

In an interview, accuser Michael Gould said he and other boys would emerge from Soens' office visibly angry or with tears streaming down their faces. Many former students accused Barb Wyatt, a school secretary, of ignoring Soens' reported actions.

"Barb Wyatt had full power to see what was going on," said Gould, one of 14 plaintiffs seeking compensation for alleged hardship they assert the former principal induced. "[Soens] called select students to the office, and she'd see them come out, and she knew what happened and what kept happening."

Regina Student No. 44, who is not seeking money but filed an affidavit in support of the plaintiffs against Soens, charged that Wyatt balked at an overt opportunity to hold her boss accountable. The incident, according to No. 44's affidavit, began when Soens started to fondle him.

"I forcefully pushed him away, which caused a significant commotion in the office," the statement reads. "Father Soens said at the time in a loud voice, 'You can consider yourself expelled.' I stated, 'I don't think so, she saw the whole thing,' and pointed to Mrs. Wyatt ... "

Soens never followed through with his threat, the student stated.

An unnamed school secretary is also accused of ignoring students' claims of abuse. The affidavit of Regina Student No. 74, who is also not seeking damages, states that after he informed the school secretary that he was feeling ill one day, Soens stepped out of his office and approached the student at the secretary's desk.

"I felt Father Soens' fingers rubbing my testicles on the outside of my pants," the statement read. "Father Soens then asked me if I felt better."

The encounter took place "right in front of the school secretary's desk, in the direct line of vision of the school secretary," the student stated.

It is unclear whether the student was referring to Wyatt, fellow secretary Doris Schwartzenruber, or another aide. In an interview, Schwartzenruber denied any wrongdoing on the part of Soens. The secretary said she reveres Soens so much that she asked the now-bishop to bless her marriage.

"I'm just flabbergasted," Schwartzenruber said. "To be honest, I don't believe anything was going on."

Claims exaggerated, some say

Some accusers side with the secretaries. Mike Dalton, who settled an abuse claim against Soens in 2004, said he doesn't hold Wyatt and the unnamed aide responsible, as accuser Steve Kinney and Nos. 44 and 74 have in their affidavits.

"I have a problem with that," Dalton said about the statements. "[Wyatt] wouldn't have seen anything. I don't buy [that] for a minute."

Dalton, who is not named as a plaintiff in pending suits but filed an affidavit supporting Soens' accusers, vouched for the more general accusations against school figures, concluding they "should have known" about the alleged abuse.

While most accusers have remained anonymous and are not seeking damages, the defense aims to prove that the named plaintiffs are merely piling on the old and fragile bishop in an effort to fatten their wallets.

Soens' attorney, Timothy Bottaro, who told the DI he will continue to defend his client although the bishop eventually won't be able to afford his legal services, said the plaintiffs' testimony has holes and discrepancies. Details from some claims were inconsistent with the architecture of the school, he said.

"We had, for example, blinds being closed over windows that didn't exist," said Bottaro, who works out of Sioux City.

Besides, he said, if Soens were guilty, witnesses would have sparked outcry regarding Soens' advancement within the diocese.

"It would have been big news back in the day, 'An Iowa City boy becomes bishop,' " Bottaro said. "Don't you think the adults who supposedly knew about this would have come forth? I think it would have dredged up a lot of ill will."

Regina was eventually dropped as a defendant in the Gould lawsuit - a judge ruled that Soens acted under the purview of the diocese, not the school's board of directors - and will likely be cut from the Cannon/Burns/Doe case. And diocese officials have steadfastly denied any wrongdoing; in a statement in response to a DI interview request, diocese spokesman David Montgomery said, "Officials of the diocese did not know and had no reason to know that abusive acts were being committed by Bishop Lawrence D. Soens at Regina High School."

Montgomery also stated that diocese officials believe a media interview with the 80-year-old Soens would not be "productive." Attempts to reach Soens through Bottaro and the Sioux City Diocese were unsuccessful.

Several local priests, including Father Michael Phillips of St. Wenceslaus, have questioned allegations that Soens engaged in lascivious conduct - while simultaneously pledging support for clergy-abuse victims.

"I have never had any reason to doubt his integrity or his faithfulness to his priestly vows," Phillips wrote in an e-mail to the DI. "My prayers are with him now as I know he is suffering intensely from these accusations."

But he continued, "My prayers are likewise with those who have truly suffered abuse of any kind."

Rudy Juarez, a priest at St. Patrick's, said in an interview that he couldn't offer an opinion on Soens' case until it goes to trial.

"No one should pass judgment until all the facts are known," he said.

Still, Juarez said, the Catholic Church needs to convey sensitivity toward those coming forth with claims against its clergy.

"We want to address any emotional scars people have suffered," he said.

Challenging 'The Man'

In the years since he first publicly accused Soens, Dalton has been asked by fellow Catholics why he's bothering with the legal brouhaha.

"I don't need to be thinking about this every cotton-pickin' day," he said while sitting at the kitchen table in his West Branch home.

Dalton, who graduated from Regina in 1964, said he was only called into Soens' office once - in November 1961.

He was a sophomore and new to the school. He said he had no idea what was going on when the principal slid out from behind his desk and fondled him.

"This was a priest," he recalled. "This was The Man."

Dalton said he tried to forget about the encounter as he moved on with his life, marrying his high-school sweetheart and starting a family.

But now, he said, he is wondering how and why such behavior occurred in the heart of an institution designed to nurture and shape young souls. At the time, he said, he didn't speak up partly because he felt he was the only one. "I'd seen other guys' [nipples] get pinched," he said. "But I thought I was the only one [fondled]."

Other students say they felt helpless when Soens crooked his finger at them. To be corralled into the principal's office with "the big guy" was the last thing anyone wanted, they remember.

Most students and witnesses - even those who say they don't remember Soens abusing students - agree it was an entirely different era.

We were trained to "think that a simple priest, let alone a principal, could send you to hell forever," Gould said. "It was a situation where you didn't even want to breathe funny."

According to the affidavit of Regina Student No. 18:

"[Soens was] God. I mean, I don't think people realize that. In Iowa City, Iowa, you had two choices. You went to City High or Regina. If you went to City High and you [were] a Catholic, you [were] an outcast. You [were] not part of the Catholic group if you went to City High. The only way you [went] to City High is when you [got] kicked out of Regina, then you [were] an outcast.

"It was a smaller city back then in 1964, '62, '61 ... I need to go to the school. I can't let my family down. [Soens] was my God. He is the one I'm getting sent to. If I complain about him, I'm getting sent to him. Nowhere else. You don't go nowhere else. You tell your mom and dad about it, they send you to Father Soens."

Like Gould, many say interactions between priests and students reflected deeply entrenched power dynamics. Soens presided over the school with a moral authority, and few felt it was their place to question him. His reign in the school was "unquestioned," Dalton said.

Monsignor James Parizek, now a pastor in Davenport, was documented in the confidential report as remembering Soens being "placed on a pedestal" by those associated with the school.

"You looked up to priests," said Joe Loria, a 1965 Regina graduate who now works as an account clerk in the UI physics department. "They were considered a step up."

While Loria said he never had any personal encounters in Soens' office, he said he often heard "fifth-hand rumors" in the hallways.

It was almost like a standing joke, he said.

Then and now

The Catholic mindset, and what many considered a climate of intimidation, was not unique to Iowa City.

Walter Brunkan, who helped found Columbus Catholic High School in Waterloo, said the priest-could-do-no-harm notion was nearly universal at the time.

"It was sort of scary," he said.

As with other priests, Brunkan said, he always tried to live up to the expectations his congregation held, consciously avoiding situations that could jeopardize his legitimacy as a man of God.

"We all tried to remember our position and therefore not get involved in things that were shady," he said.

When Soens was principal, it simply wasn't common practice to discuss the types of alleged occurrences that Regina graduates are now making public. But today, Catholic school officials have to be able to defend their actions, said Tom Ulses, the current principal at Waterloo Columbus.

Clergymen who double as administrators often take extra caution when it comes to disciplinary procedures, he said.

"Just because Father said it, that isn't good enough anymore," he said.

While serving as principal at Columbus from 1959 until 1991, Brunkan watched as national sentiment sweep through the church, changing attitudes about authority figures. The influx of drug use, campus riots, and sexual liberation in the 1960s and 1970s trickled into diocesan policies, he said.

But for Soens' accusers, the watershed changes didn't come soon enough.

Critics of diocesan culture say, had the transparency that prevails today been at mainstay in Catholic institutions of the 1960s, troubled priests could have been rehabilitated rather than be shuffled from diocese to diocese, parish to parish, in hopes that God would intervene.

As Gould, Dalton, and other accusers move on with their lives, they mull over the future of the Catholic Church. Anonymous Soens accusers and witnesses remain in the background, their voices obscured, but their messages resonating with disturbed believers nationwide.

And the trials against Soens remains suspended in court, a reminder of all their experiences at Regina 40 years ago.