

Suit alleges sexual abuse at closed Catholic school

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By Janet I. Tu

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A lawsuit filed yesterday alleges extensive sexual and physical abuse of three boys decades ago at Kent's Briscoe Memorial School for Boys, a now-closed Catholic grade school owned by the Seattle Archdiocese and run by the Congregation of Christian Brothers, a religious order.

The suit also says one of the boys was abused while living at Briscoe and attending O'Dea High School, which is owned by the archdiocese and operated by the Christian Brothers.

It is one of a growing number of lawsuits and accusations claiming abuse at Briscoe, a boarding school that served orphans and boys from broken homes. The school was closed in 1970.

The suit comes in the same week that a national report released by the nation's bishops said most of the country's dioceses, including the Seattle Archdiocese, were complying with new standards designed to protect minors from abuse by clergy. Critics complain the report didn't address how past abuses such as those alleged in this suit, were handled.

Greg Magnoni, archdiocese spokesman, referred comments on the suit to the Christian Brothers, saying "the Christian Brothers really are not under the supervision of the archdiocese." Administrators at O'Dea did not immediately return calls for comment.

Brother Daniel Casey, with the Congregation of Christian Brothers in Joliet, Ill., said he could not comment on the suit because he hadn't seen it yet.

But he added: "Every time we get an accusation, formal or informal, we take it very seriously. We are very concerned about the safety of young people we have in our care at this time and at times in the past."

Casey said that only in the last year did the Christian Brothers hear any allegations of past abuse at Briscoe and O'Dea.

The suit also accuses the archdiocese and the order of covering up the abuses.

Yesterday's suit was filed in King County Superior Court on behalf of three men identified by the initials R.E., S.H. and R.C.

Ray Ekins, the "R.E." in the suit, agreed to disclose his full name for publication. Ekins, 68, of Spokane, boarded for about four years at Briscoe in the 1940s, starting when he was about 7. On his first day there, he said, one of the brothers took him to the showers, fondled him and had the boy fondle the brother and perform oral sex on him.

Ekins also said he was often beaten with a large leather strap. He had epilepsy and was beaten each time he had a seizure, he said. The lawsuit says Ekins also was raped.

"I was abused every day of the week, it seemed like, for at least four years," he said. "It's a lifetime of suffering."

S.H., 56, who lives in Island County, attended Briscoe and O'Dea in the late 1950s and early '60s. The suit says he was beaten, usually with a leather strap, while at Briscoe, and sexually molested at O'Dea.

The beatings were "extremely excessive," S.H., who wanted to be identified only by initials, said in an earlier interview. "It was just a daily dose of brutality."

The lawsuit claims the third plaintiff, R.C., who lives in Pima County, Ariz., was beaten, tortured and raped while at Briscoe.

The suit accuses seven brothers, some of them now deceased, by name. The Seattle Times is not naming them because they are accused of criminal activity in a civil case that is unresolved.

One was a former teacher at a local Catholic high school. He was removed from the school last year after the Christian Brothers received complaints about him from one of the plaintiffs, Casey said. Casey said the Christian Brothers have hired an independent investigator to look into the allegations against that brother.

Others also have recently come forward with abuse allegations at Briscoe and O'Dea.

Last April, a 50-year-old Portland man filed suit against the Seattle Archdiocese, accusing one of its priests of molesting him in the 1960s when he was a student at Briscoe.

In March last year, Mike Coolen, a Corvallis, Ore., man, filed suit against the Seattle Archdiocese and the Christian Brothers, saying a deceased brother also named in yesterday's suit had sexually abused him at O'Dea in the early 1960s. That suit was settled last week.

Other men who have not filed lawsuits also have come forward.

Michael Cafferty, 57, of Shoreline boarded at Briscoe from 1958 to 1961. He said he was beaten, sometimes daily, with straps, broomsticks and fishing poles. He said he was sometimes awakened at night by a brother who asked him sexual questions.

Jerry Blinn, 65, of Placitas, N.M., said he was regularly beaten with a leather strap when he attended Briscoe from 1946 to 1950. Sometimes the brothers would hit the students so hard, Blinn said, that "the brother's feet would leave the ground."

In addition, he said one of the priests or brothers would entice him to his room and show him pornography.

The Congregation of Christian Brothers is headquartered in Rome and has about 1,400 brothers worldwide. In recent years, the order has been buffeted by allegations of sexual and physical abuse at several schools around the world.

In Canada, the order was dissolved in the mid-1990s to help pay a multimillion-dollar settlement with some 90 victims abused over several decades at an orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Last year, the order adopted a revised sexual-abuse-prevention policy that includes providing assistance to victims in obtaining counseling, removing the accused from ministry with children and contacting civil authorities in the case of current minors.

"I hope we have been very contrite and apologetic to those we definitely have hurt," Casey said. "That's our primary concern: that they will be able to heal from the hurt that they've experienced."

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