West Orange ex-priest assists victims of sexual abuse

Sean Quinn
Staff Writer

Speak with Bob Hoatson for just a few minutes and it becomes immediately apparent that he is a genuinely nice man. Immensely friendly and down-to-earth, Hoatson just seems like the type of guy who would shovel your porch without being asked or check your house while you were away on vacation — selfless. It is easy to imagine him working for the Catholic Church, which he did for more than 30 years.

What is not evident is the fact that Hoatson has experienced many personal tragedies throughout his life. He said he was sexually abused by more than one clergyman as an Irish Christian Brother and later as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Newark, and is now recalling repressed memories of being molested by a school custodian as a young boy. In 2011, he was dispensed from his priestly vows by the Vatican upon his request after facing years of resistance from the church over his work as a clergy-abuse victims' advocate.

But Hoatson did not succumb to his hardships. Instead, he co-founded the Road to Recovery nonprofit organization to support victims of sexual abuse like himself. And though his past experiences being molested were undoubtedly horrific, he said they have proven to be an asset in helping those dealing with similar circumstances.

"It is immeasurable, the assistance that it provides," Hoatson told the West Orange Chronicle in a Dec. 29 phone interview. 'When I talk to somebody who has been through it, I can say 'I know what you are going through, I think. I have an idea of what you are going through because I have had similar experiences.' So when they talk about nightmares and flashbacks and depression and anxiety and all kinds of other symptoms about having been sexually abused, I know what they are talking about."

Road to Recovery's mission is to help victims of sexual abuse in any way possible, including providing financial assistance and getting addicts into drug rehabilitation programs. Yet perhaps the most vital component of its work is simply providing the empathy and emotional support necessary to help abuse victims recover from their trauma.

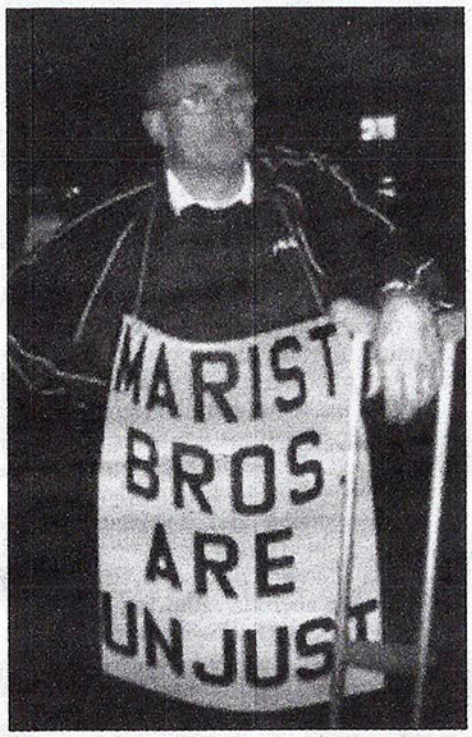

Photo Courtesy of Road to Recovery web site

West Orange resident Robert Hoatson has been active for many years on the forefront of seeking care and guidance for the victims of sexual abuse.

Those interested in help from the organization contact Hoatson, and he meets them in person as soon as possible. In fact, he said he has dropped everything to travel from his home in West Orange to faraway states because it is necessary to get abuse victims talking before they change their minds about opening up. From there, he said he puts them in touch with area therapists affiliated or approved by Road to Recovery who can further heal their mental anguish. Hoatson said he also hosts victim support meetings once a month for the same reason.

"Talk therapy is crucial," Hoatson said. "Probably the worst part about abuse is that once it happens, people are put into silence. And that silence is the killer. So if we can get people just to continue to talk about it, they can begin to realize 'Wow, this was not my fault. I was just an innocent victim.'"

Hoatson said therapy is not easy, and results are not instantaneous. He should know; he said he too undergoes therapy sessions and probably will for the rest of his life. Plus, he pointed out that some people may need to take medication to treat the effects childhood trauma has on the brain. Still, he urged abuse victims to stay with counseling no matter how difficult it becomes because it is "nearly impossible" to recover in isolation.

Many have benefited from this missive. According to Hoatson, Road to Recovery has helped close to 3,000 victims of sexual abuse since being established in 2003. While the nonprofit was initially created to help victims of clergy abuse, making it the only charity in the nation to specialize in such treatment, Road to Recovery supports anyone who has ever been molested. He said the list of people currently being helped includes an alleged Bill Cosby victim and some of Jerry Sandusky's victims.

Kevin Waldrip is one abuse victim who has turned his life around thanks to Road to Recovery. Waldrip said he was molested by a priest with whom he had been close when he was just 13 years old. Before that, he said he wanted nothing more than to enter the clergy himself but, after being abused, his faith and life were shattered. Prior to meeting Hoatson, he described himself as being "totally dysfunctional," homeless and suicidal, wondering where he had gone wrong.

It was only after reading a newspaper article about a clergy-abuse victim, Waldrip said, that he realized his own violation was at the root of his problems and sought assistance. He was referred to Hoatson, though Waldrip said that he was skeptical that a priest could help him. But Hoatson came through, providing financial assistance and setting him up with therapy.

Today, Waldrip said his life is straightened out, thanks in large part to Hoatson and the work of Road to Recovery.

"I am somewhat stabilized for the first time in my adult life," Waldrip told the Chronicle in a Dec. 30 phone interview. "I have my own apartment. I have a 15-year-old vehicle, but I still keep it running. I am at a better place. I have worked with Road to Recovery. I have worked in psychological therapy for the last 10 years. So I have constantly worked on myself, and one of the reasons why is Bob Hoatson and Road to Recovery because he took the time out of his life to help me when I was at a very dark place."

Likewise, Lou Romano said he owes his son's life to Hoatson, who he called a "saint." Romano explained that when his son was 21, he was a drug addict in trouble with the law. Eventually Romano said he discovered that his boy had been molested by a priest when he was 7 years old, thus leading him down a dark path. But things changed for the better once he got in touch with Hoatson.

According to Romano, Hoatson checked his son into a drug rehabilitation program and personally attended every one of the young man's 15 to 20 court hearings. Most of all, he said Hoatson got his son to talk about his experience, which he was at first reluctant to do. As a result, Romano said his son is now sober and flourishing working for one of his companies, and it is all because of Hoatson's support.

"Without the help of Bob Hoatson, I do not know where we would be," Romano, who has written a novel based on his son's experience, told the Chronicle in a Dec. 30 phone interview. "When you say that name I literally genuflect. The man has done more than anyone, I think, in the country to fight these criminal predators.

"What Bob has done for my family and many, many other families that I have witnessed is amazing," Romano said.

Waldrip and Romano both remain heavily involved with Road to Recovery, participating in Hoatson's support groups and demonstrating outside the parishes of priests accused of abuse. The latter reflects another key component of the organization's mission: to aggressively battle molestation in the Catholic Church.

See **A LIFE**, Page 4

(Continued from Page 3)

Though sexual abuse committed by priests has been widely reported in the national media, there is actually little data to suggest that there is more abuse committed within the Catholic Church than within other religions. The only major study to analyze clergy abuse was the John Jay College of Criminal Justice's 2004 report, which used numbers supplied by dioceses and was actually commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops following the hotly debated 2002 molestation scandal.

That study found that only 4,392 clergymen, or 4 percent, of the 109,694 ordained clergymen were accused of sexually abusing 10,667 minors between 1950 and 2002. Almost all were priests. The report further stated that no action was taken against the accused in 10 percent of the allegations, and the alleged molesters were reprimanded and returned to the ministry in six percent of the reported incidents. The accused clergy were also suspended in 29 percent of allegations and placed on administrative leave in 24 percent of them.

Yet Hoatson said he has encountered clergy abuse, aside from his own experiences, throughout his decades-long tenure within the church. In fact, he said he started working with abuse victims after two of his former students — whom he had suspected were being molested by a chaplain when he was assistant headmaster of a Boston Catholic high school in 1981 — went public about being abused in 2001. He said they became two of the first people he counseled after he reached out and apologized to them for not doing more to stop their violation.

The reason sexual abuse of minors is an issue within the Catholic Church specifically, according to Hoatson, is due to the way church is managed.

"The church is set up as kind of an absolute monarchy where it is basically controlled by one person and whoever that person gives power to," Hoatson explained. "Sexual abuse is really an abuse of power.

"In the church, power can be abused very, very readily," Hoatson added. "And when you have a monarchy like the church is, people begin to read their own newspaper clippings that they are so good and so holy and so powerful and so righteous and so moral that they go off the rails."

Another reason for the abuse, Hoatson pointed out, is the fact that priests are forced to be celibate, which can lead to suppressed sexuality and resulting aberrations. To resolve these issues, he suggested changing the church's power structure to be more democratic, allowing priests to marry and permitting women to enter the clergy.

Meanwhile, Road to Recovery plans to continue its protests against accused clergymen who have not been removed from power. Additionally Father Kenneth Lasch, a longtime victims' advocate who co-founded the nonprofit along with Hoatson, told the Chronicle that the organization sets victims up with legal counsel to seek justice for what happened to them. Lasch said victims can also benefit from receiving a settlement in their cases because many are afflicted with post traumatic stress disorder and cannot work.

Mitchell Garabedian, a Boston attorney who has received national attention for his representation of sexual abuse victims, has worked with Road to Recovery since its beginnings. Garabedian told the Chronicle that his experience representing thousands of victims through the years has been "enormously rewarding," since the court is a way for them to find validation and closure. But few would have the strength to file a lawsuit without emotional support, which is why Hoatson should be lauded for the work he does, he said.

"Because of Bob's tireless effort to make public the names of sexual abusers, victims become empowered, the public is made aware of such pedophiles and the world is made a safer place for children," Garabedian said in a Jan. 2 phone interview.

For Hoatson, however, the payoff for helping victims of molestation is not praise, but the satisfaction of seeing them turn their lives around.

His own life has benefited from working with them as well. After all, he said it was only after helping the victims when he was 52 that he gained the strength to talk about his own abuse, and for that he will always be grateful.

"It has been my recovery, too," Hoatson said. "As I got more and more involved with it, I realized that this is helping me probably as much as it is helping them."

W. Orange Library offers story times

The West Orange Public Library, located at 46 Mt. Pleasant Ave. in West Orange, offers the following upcoming events. Call 973-736-0198 or visit www.wopl.org.

Storytimes

Fall storytimes occur weekly, unless otherwise announced, at the same time at the library.

Babies & Books, Fridays at 10:30 a.m. This storytime includes stories, songs and rhymes for infants up to 24 months old;

Terrific Toddlers, Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. or Fridays at 11:30 a.m. This storytime includes stories, songs and finger-plays for children ages 2 to 3 ½ years old.

Pre-school Page Turners, Mondays at 3:30 p.m. or Tuesdays at 11:30 a.m. This storytime includes stories, songs and games for children ages 3 1/2 to 5 years old;