

ADRIAN WALKER

Advice from a victim



One thing that makes Phil Saviano happy is his birds.

His home is full of wood carvings of birds, dragons, angels, monkeys — carvings he imports from Mexico and sells over the Internet. It's not a career. It's a

creative hobby, a way to bring some balance to his life.

For the past decade, he has been consumed by advocating for people who have been, as he was, abused by priests. Saviano, until recently the head of the New England chapter of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, is the rare man who has lived to see his vindication.

He has run support groups. He has taken late-night phone calls from men weeping over abuse they suffered decades ago. He has given countless interviews. A decade ago, many people considered victims (or "alleged victims") to be crackpots, whiners, opportunists. Now the unthinkable has occurred: Cardinal Bernard F. Law has been forced from the chancery, and the church has been forced to take the issue of sexual abuse to heart.

Even 18 months ago, no one saw that coming, including Saviano.

"Finally, victims are being first of all believed," Saviano said this week. "And they're being respected instead of ridiculed and criticized. Most of all, they're seeing there is power in joining together and speaking out, and you can have results. Laws are being changed, attorney generals have perked up their ears around the country. These are changes that victims, myself included, could only have dreamed of."

Saviano, 50, was abused in 1964 and 1965 by Father David Holley, an assistant pastor at St. Denis Parish in the Diocese of Worcester. He was a paperboy whose route took him to the parish each morning. His friend was an altar boy. At times they were abused together. He settled with the church in 1995, and Holley is in prison for unrelated abuse cases.

Unlike many victims, Saviano had never repressed memories of his abuse. But he says he "never, ever saw the significance of it," never relating antisocial behavior in his 20s and 30s to what had happened to him as a boy. When he did, he became, almost accidentally, a fulltime advocate. His first interview dealing with his abuse was 10 years ago today. Saviano kept a tape of it, and plans to listen to that watershed moment today.

"At that time, that talking about my abuse was very, very embarrassing to me," Saviano said. "I think I'll probably hear a younger guy who was struggling to keep his composure while he gets the words out."

For all the phenomenal courage shown in the past year by victims of clergy sexual abuse, it was even more difficult a decade ago. In most of the country, including New England, there was no SNAP, no Voice of the Faithful from which to draw emotional sustenance.

By the summer of 2001, Saviano was considering leaving SNAP, feeling that his time and energy had been wasted, that the plight of victims had not really improved. That began to change early this year, and ultimately changed in a way he once would have believed impossible.

For Saviano, the past year has been trying personally. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1984, and found the 10-hour days required to deal with the clergy scandal in 2002 taxing, both emotionally and physically. He found himself crying in interviews sometimes, and neglected to take care of himself. In October, he relinquished his position in SNAP, and he now hopes to spend more time speaking to college students and writing. Time for more balance.

Saviano has no plans to leave the field, just to scale back. As always, he has advice for victims. First, find someone to talk to; silence, he says, is poison. Talking is the antidote.

Then this: "There's a lot of joy to be found in life, and all survivors, regardless of how much pain they're in, should find a way to open themselves up to some happiness and some pleasure."

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