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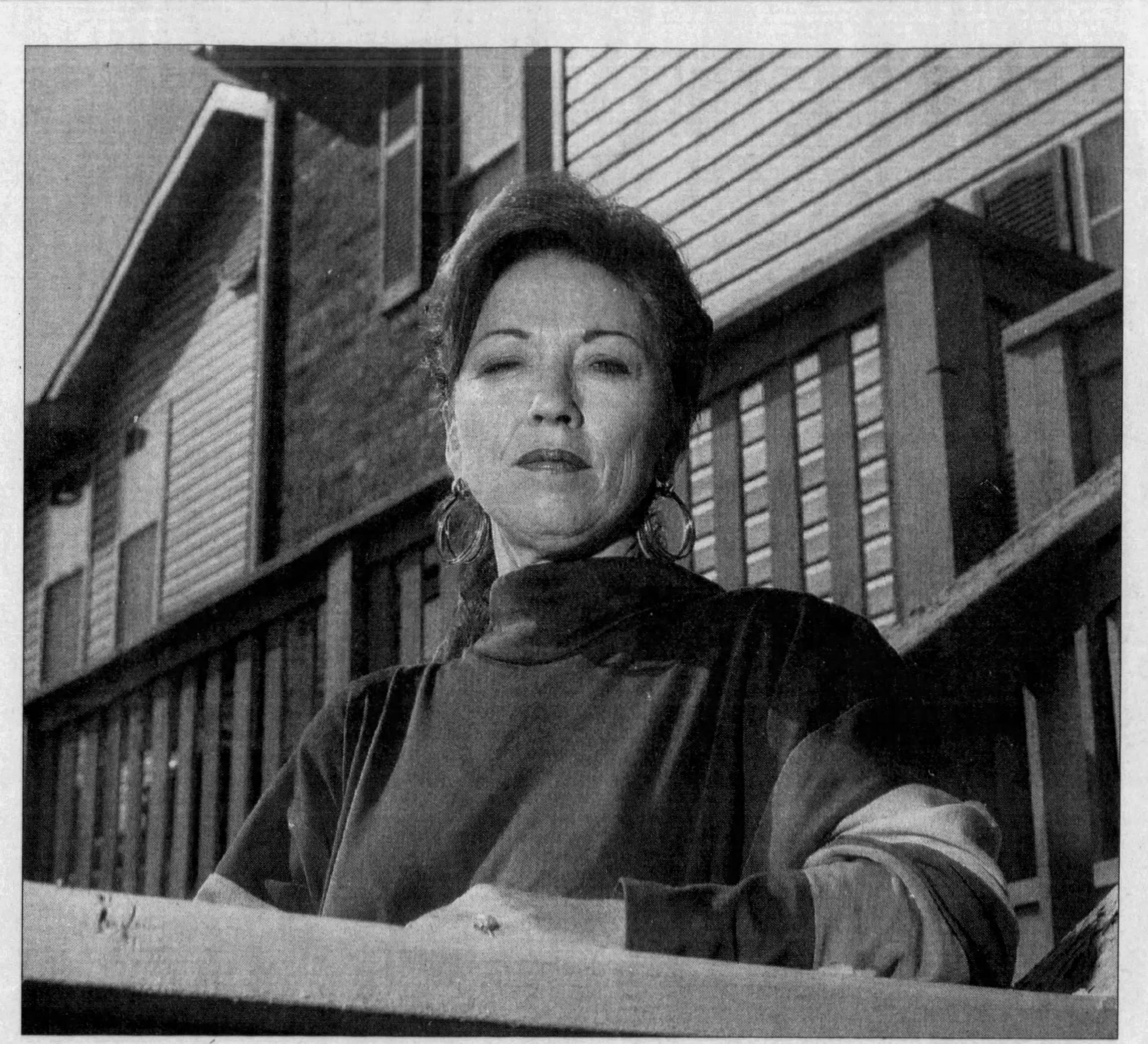


Photo for the Tribune by Tim Boyle

Jeanne Miller: "Any one of us can forgive one man, but it is much more difficult to forgive an entire institution."

An unbroken spirit

sued a priest.

of Arlington, Va., told

her she would be

breaking canon law if she

Through a spokesman,

Keating says that "any

allegations of improper

procedure are unfounded

During the past 10

years, Miller, who now

lives in Palatine, says she

has learned that her treat-

ment is not unusual.

Through The Linkup, an

advocacy group she start-

ed in 1991 and originally

called VOCAL, she has

learned that she met with

the typical church re-

sponse. In the past year,

and simply false."

By Cheryl Lavin

Robert Mayer was found guilty of sexually abusing a teenage girl while he was pastor at St. Odilo Catholic Church in Berwyn. On Friday, he is scheduled to be sentenced.

Planning to be there is Jeanne Miller, 45, who has followed the case with more than just casual interest. In fact, she has followed every step of Mayer's career for 10 years.

"I know more about

him than his own mother," says Miller.

In 1982, Mayer was a parish priest at St. Edna's Catholic Church in Arlington Heights, the church Miller attended with her family. And in 1982, Miller's 13-year-old son claimed he had been molested by Mayer during an outing to Fox Lake.

Her response was, "A priest wouldn't do that."

Then she learned that, perhaps, a priest would do that.

Then she came to believe that the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago would do little about it.

When Miller brought her son's allegations to church officials, she says she was first ignored, then stonewalled and finally threatened with excommunication. The chancellor of the archdiocese, John Richard Keating, now the bishop

of priest for molestation isn't enough for a mom who

Conviction

believes the entire church

shares the guilt

she has been in touch with more than 3,000 victims and their family members nationwide. Their stories are so similar that she has come to believe that there exists "a major institutional cover-up."

"I get eight or nine calls and letters a day," Miller says. "I wait for the one that says, 'Father So-and-So abused my child and I went to the church and they were wonderful. They provided my child with counseling, they removed the priest from his parish and they reported him to the local authorities.' That call has never come."

Jeanne Miller was born in Chicago. She attended Catholic school, St. Eugene's in Norridge.

"I remember the nuns would say that in every family there is one child who is called to serve a religious life. And there was just my brother and me, and I knew it wasn't my brother, so in about 2nd grade I thought, 'It must be me,' " she says.

After a year of college, she entered a convent in Dubuque, Iowa, run by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She stayed two years.

"It was the 4th of July and I was standing on this cliff, watching the Mississippi River flow by. My veil was blowing in the wind and I thought, 'This is "The Sound of Music." This isn't real. I'm being trained to go out and save the world and I don't know a thing about it.' I was holding a sparkler in one hand and a lemonade in the other. I looked at them and thought, 'I should have a martini and a cigarette.'"

Miller left the next morning and returned home. She got married and started having babies. In 1982, Miller and her husband and four children were living in Arlington Heights, attending St. Edna's. The church was the center of the family's life. "Our heartbeat," Miller calls it. She taught religious education, and her husband was a teen minister. Her oldest son, Tom, was an altar boy, and her next son was in training to become one. When the new parish priest, Rev. Mayer, invited Tom to his family's summer cottage, Miller was "thrilled."

"Tom was making some noises about maybe he'd like to be a priest, and I figured this would be a wonderful way for him to feel closer to the church, to get to know a priest personally. I just thought it was great."

Tom returned a different boy.

"He had been this perfect child,' Miller says. "When he got home he was de-

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fiant, talking back to us, slamming doors on us.

Eventually, Tom told Miller that Mayer had given him and three other boys liquor and marijuana, showed them pornographic movies, exposed himself and fondled them.

Mayer's attorney, Pat Tuite, says Mayer took off his bathing suit so he wouldn't get his car seat wet and wrapped a towel around himself. One of the boys pulled off the towel and Mayer jumped in the water. Some "horseplay" followed, "but it wasn't sexual." Tuite says Mayer allowed the boys to drink beer, but didn't give them marijuana or show them pornography.

Miller says that when she relayed Tom's allegations to the pastor, Rev. Walter Somerville, he told her: "Pursue it. [Mayer] has a

problem with young boys." Somerville, who was unsuccessful in getting the archdiocese to confront Mayer and is now retired, confirms the conversation.

Miller discussed the allegations with the director of religious education, Marilyn Steffel, who told her that Mayer had already been reported to the archdiocese.

"Our staff had asked for guidance because there were a lot of things going on" with Mayer, Steffel says. "There were incidents of kids getting alcohol at the rectory. We heard rumors about marijuana and sexual misconduct. Basically we were told to live with it. They weren't much help."

Eventually, Miller learned that Mayer's problems began before he got to St. Edna's. After being contacted by Miller's attorney, families at his previous parish, St. Mary's in Lake Forest, signed affidavits accusing him of appearing nude in front of young boys, giving them beer and making lewd remarks. One boy signed a statement accusing Mayer of repeatedly grabbing the youth's genitals.

Miller finally called the chancery herself and spoke with Rev. Kenneth Velo, now Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's executive assistant, then head of the diocese personnel board. Miller says he told her that she was just giving in to her "motherly instincts" and that she couldn't prove a thing.

Velo was unavailable for comment.

"The bottom line was, they wouldn't do anything," Miller

At that point, Miller says, all she wanted was for Mayer's access to children to be restricted and for the boys to get counseling. "It never occurred to us to go to the police or take any legal action," she says.

But then Mayer called. Miller says he threatened to sue her for libel. He told her he had friends on the high school football team who would take care of her son. For six months, Tom was afraid to use the bathroom at school, Miller says.

"I was dying," Miller says. "I couldn't breathe.

"I've never heard those allegations before," says Tuite, who was not Mayer's attorney at the time.

When the Lake County state's attorney's office said it had insufficient evidence to proceed against Mayer, Miller hired a lawyer, the only one she knew, who had handled the closing of her house. Suddenly she, who had grown up in a church that told her to "forgive and forget, turn the other cheek, smile and nod in the face of anything," was suing the archdiocese.

Eventually the legal bills exceeded \$30,000. To pay them, Miller took in laundry, cleaned houses, held garage sales and sold her jew-

In 1984, "financially, morally, physically and spiritually devastated," the Millers agreed to settle the suit.

The archdiocese refused to acknowledge any guilt on Mayer's part and would not pay for counseling for the boys. But it agreed to pay half the legal fees and, as part of the settlement, Bernardin agreed to meet with the families. When they went to his office, Miller says, he pointed to a stack of papers on his desk and said they were all sexual complaints against priests. The families wanted Bernardin to promise that Mayer would never be in contact with children again. Bernardin refused, but Miller says he told her: 'Trust us. You'll have to trust

In October 1991, when the latest sexual abuse allegations against Mayer were made public, Miller says she reminded Bernardin of those words in a face-to-face



Photo for the Tribune by Tim Boyle

Jeanne Miller believes the Catholic Church is engaged in "a major institutional cover-up" of sex abuse by priests.

meeting.

"He said he was sorry," Miller says. "He said he was wrong, that he made a big mistake."

Repeated attempts to reach Bernardin for comment were unsuccessful.

Miller's suit was settled in 1984, but, for her, the matter was far from over. The ordeal had ruined her marriage. "We were both trying to restructure our belief system, but we did it in different ways and it took us in different directions." Miller's husband turned to the church, she turned away. In 1988, they got divorced.

Miller wrote a fictionalized account of her son's abuse. When "Assault on Innocence" was published in 1987, she went on the talk-show circuit. Flying home from San Francisco one day, she sat next to a middle-age man. He asked her why she had been on TV. She told him.

"He was quiet for a while and then he said: 'I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone, not my wife, not my children, not my parents. When I was 13, I was an altar boy and the pastor of my church raped me. I wake up with that every morning of my life."

Incidents like that happened constantly, Miller says. People stopped her to tell their stories. "They were like the walking dead," she says. "They were coming out of the woodwork."

The book wasn't enough therapy, and Miller went back to school

to study theology. "My religion was very important to me. When it was ripped out from under me, I needed something to replace it.' As her master's thesis she wrote "Pedophilia in the Priesthood: A Church in Crisis."

In 1991, after the latest allegations against Mayer surfaced, Miller started VOCAL, now called The Linkup. The headquarters are in the basement of her Palatine townhouse. She has invested thousands of her own dollars to get it going, peanuts she knows, because she is up against "the richest, most powerful organization in the world."

She gets up every day at 3 a.m. to work for a few hours before she goes to her job as a paralegal. She works at a law firm from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., then goes home and puts in another eight hours on The Linkup, answering letters, returning calls, maintaining files on 2,000 priests nationally who have been accused of child abuse. She recently turned over to the Cook County state's attorney's office a list of more than 50 priests against whom allegations have been made. She is working with the office to track down witnesses and encourage victims to come forward.

Bernardin has called on her too, asking her to observe the program at the Isaac Ray Center in Chicago where priests are sent for evaluation and treatment.

Last March, she met with the Cardinal's Commission on Clerical Sexual Misconduct With Minors.

She told the panel that the church's response has been to cover it up. She was asked if this had changed in 10 years.

"I said the only thing that has changed is the church's sophistication in covering up," she says.

Miller says nothing has changed since Bernardin announced his new policy for handling clerical sexual misconduct in September.

"There's still no 800 number hot line and no fitness review administrator who would have to report suspected abuse. Allegations are being forwarded to the vicar for priests, who has received a magic. shield from the courts allowing him to withhold information based on pastoral privilege. If anything, the church has even tighter control."

In October, The Linkup held its first national conference, in Arlington Heights, the first conference of its kind in the history of the church, according to the National Catholic Reporter. More than 300 victims were there. No one from the Chicago archdiocese attended. Bernardin had been scheduled to speak but canceled, saying he thought an appearance would be counterproductive.

"What she has done is unique," says Rev. Thomas Doyle, an Air Force chaplain at Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana, who has been active since the mid-1980s in the study of child sexual abuse by priests. "I'm amazed at the strength she has after the way she was treated by the archdiocese. She bucked the system and she's winning.

"She's a very dedicated woman," says Rev. Andrew Greeley, the Chicago-based sociologist-author who has been an outspoken critic of the church on this subject. "She's done an enormous amount to bring this to the public's attention and to keep the pressure on the church to make sure that reform is going to happen.

She won't give up. "It's not over," she says, "not for me or my son, or for any of the others who've suffered. Any one of us can forgive one man, but it is much more difficult to forgive an entire institution.'

It's with "mixed emotions" that Miller says she will sit in the Cook County circuit courtroom Friday for Mayer's sentencing. Anger and frustration and sadness are among

"How tragic it is that another child was hurt, despite all that we did," she says. "And how tragic that Mayer never got any help, either. I believe he was salvageable if the church would have helped him. Now his life is wasted too."