

# Abuse by priests is tough to discuss

By Bill McClellan, stltoday.com, October 12, 2009

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One day this spring, members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests gathered outside the archdiocese offices on Lindell Boulevard to call attention to a newly filed lawsuit that alleged sexual abuse by a priest.

The allegation concerned an incident that occurred 17 or 18 years ago. The date was vague. So was the exact nature of the sexual abuse. About the only thing that was crystal clear was the name of the accused - the Rev. Kevin Hederman.

This newspaper ran a story about the lawsuit. The story named Hederman as the accused priest. The story noted that although Hederman was still a priest working for the archdiocese, he had been working in Belize for a number of years. The story also quoted a statement that was released by the accuser's lawyer, but the accuser, who was in his car across the street from the gathering on Lindell, was identified only as John Doe 115, which was

the name under which he filed the lawsuit

I met with the accuser last week. He is in his mid-30s. He's married. He's a salesman. He said he's doing fine right now, but he hit a rough spot a couple of years ago and filed for bankruptcy. He said he figures the church might use that against him in court and try to depict him as a would-be money grabber.

In fact, a number of people already have accused him of that, he told me. He said those accusations were made on the "comment thread" that follows stories posted on the Internet version of this paper, [STLtoday.com](http://STLtoday.com).

I am not a big fan of the comment threads. Too often, the comments lack the thoughtful quality you see in letters to the editor. Perhaps that's because people who write letters to the editor use their real names and people who write on the comment threads don't. So the comment threads tend more toward shouting than toward discourse.

Hederman's accuser was not complaining about the anonymous people who had attacked him. Quite the contrary. He said that one reason he came forward - the big reason, he said - was to get Hederman's name out as an

abuser and to get people talking. Which they did on the comment thread. And then the story and the comment thread were taken off the site. John Doe 115 wondered about that. Had the church intervened?

I said I doubted that, but I would check. I asked the [STLtoday.com](http://STLtoday.com) people and they told me that stories are removed from the site after 30 days. That does not hold true for columns or blogs, they said.

By the way, John Doe 115 seemed like a sincere and thoughtful man, and I asked him what he thought of this whole business of anonymity. Should an accuser be allowed to remain anonymous while the accused is named? It doesn't seem fair, does it?

He considered the question for a moment, and then said that he did not want to be identified by his victim status.

I also posed that question to David Clohessy of SNAP, who said that he is asked that question often, and always responds that if a person does not like the idea of protecting the identity of victims, the person should contact his or her legislators and have the laws changed. "We have a long history of protecting the identity of crime victims, especially victims of sexual crimes,

especially juvenile victims of sexual crimes," he said.

Few people know more about this subject than Clohessy, who was a victim himself, and perhaps he's right when he says that the decision to come forward is inherently difficult because the accuser was often a troubled youngster and the accused was, and is, often held in high regard in the community, and if you have to give the accuser anonymity to come forward, then so be it.

Not surprisingly, people on the other side see it differently.

Attorney Chuck Billings, who represents Hederman, scoffed at the notion of allowing a man in his 30s to remain anonymous. "If he were a juvenile, that's one thing. He's not a juvenile. It's ridiculous. If a person wants to file a lawsuit under seal then both sides are anonymous. No public disclosure. If it's good for one side, it should be good for the other."

I also spoke to Hederman's sister. "I don't understand how something like that could be published with no substantiation," she said. "Once the die is cast, how do you regain your reputation?"

She asked that I not use her name. Of course not, I said.

Later, I received an e-mail from John Doe 115. He asked that I not use some of the specific background information he had given me. My family would easily recognize me, he said. No problem, I replied.

Sexual abuse by priests is a real problem. It is not a figment of anybody's imagination. It is also a terrible violation of trust. Still, I am not sure we have figured out how best to handle allegations of such abuse.