

HB 2306 Hearing, 2.11.20
House Committee on Judiciary
Kansas State Legislature

Thank you for having this hearing today on the important matter of extending the time that victims of child sex abuse have for bringing a cause of action.

More importantly, thank you for hearing my testimony about my childhood sexual abuse in Kansas.

My name is Susan Leighnor. I was born in Hutchinson, Kansas into a catholic family. My family attended Church of the Holy Cross. I attended Holy Cross Catholic School for first grade, fourth grade and CCD classes.

Mass was always held in the morning before the school day began. After mass we would go back into the classrooms. One day after mass when I was 10 years old and in fourth grade, a boy came to our classroom and told my teacher, who was a nun, that I needed to go see Father. Father was in fact, Monsignor Irvin F. Lampe. It was always an older boy who came to the classroom. He could have been an altar boy. I was led into the sacristy that was to the right of the altar where Monsignor Lampe was waiting for me. The boy went back out into the church and sat in a pew just outside the sacristy. As I stepped into the sacristy, Lampe was removing the white top he had worn during mass. He then sat down and pulled me close to him. He began talking to me about my parents getting a divorce. Lampe would go on to rape me.

After raping me, he held my hands and looked me in the face and told me that I was not going to talk about this. He told me this was like confession. We don't talk about what happens in confession so you are not going to talk about this. And if you do, you will go to hell.

I understood clearly that I could go to hell if I spoke about what had happened.

At some point, Lampe also told me that he was like God here on earth. If I was talking to him, I was, in fact, talking to God. This concept of a priest being God was not new to me. I learned throughout my catholic schooling that the priest was like God. I heard this many times from the nuns when I was in school.

I still remember the priest telling me to go back to class. So I walked back to my classroom, trying to straighten out my underpants as I walked down the hallway. I was confused, angry and unsure what had happened. I am sure I cried walking back to class. By the time I got back to class, I would have stuffed my tears because the nuns hated it when a child cried.

I was raped at least three times by Lampe. I know this because the first time I walked directly back to class. The second time, I decided to go into the restroom and straighten myself out. Another time, I stayed too long in the restroom and my teacher came looking for me. I had lost track of time. I remember standing at the sink, washing my hands, and the nun standing behind me talking, blah, blah, blah ...

One time the boy came to class to get me. Instead of walking out the door, I summoned the courage to walk up to the teacher's desk and tell her quietly that I did not want to go see Father. The nun looked at me and told me I had to go see Father. I told her again I did not want to go see Father. And again, she told me I had to go. As I walked out the door, I stopped and looked back over my shoulder at the teacher, hoping she would tell me not to go, but instead she told me I had to go, so I did.

The pattern was the same; the boy would come get me out of class and take me to the sacristy. The boy would sit in the pew. Lampe would shut the door.

I remember touching his penis.

One time, I struggled to get away from Lampe, but a 10-year old little girl is no match to a grown man.

Afterwards, I would walk past the boy in the pew and return to class.

Imagine, I was expected to continue learning for the rest of the day after being raped in the sacristy.

I was not the only child who was called to see the priest. I saw others get called to see him.

I never spoke about what happened to me to my parents, or anyone. Out of pure fear, I did not want to go to hell. I know this fear of going to hell was reinforced in me when a classmate, a little girl, was injured on the playground and died a day later. I remember thinking that I could die on the playground. And if I died on the playground, I did not want to go to hell.

You see, the concept of hell being a burning inferno with people screaming out in agony was real for me, and I certainly did not want to ever go to hell.

So I repressed all the memories of my rapes by Lampe. Never to be spoken of until 50 years later when the memories returned.

As the school year went on, Lampe was gone, or at least he was not at the school.

Towards the end of fourth grade, after mass, a boy came to the classroom and told my teacher that Father wanted to see me. So I went to the sacristy. This time, Father Francis Cox was there. (He had said the morning mass before school.) As Cox sat in the chair, he called me over to come near him. He held out his left arm and wrapped it around me. Cox told me he wanted to introduce me to the new priest who was going to take over when Father Lampe left. He motioned for me to sit on the bench to his left which I did. After I sat down, I noticed another priest across the room. Cox then introduced me to Father William Wheeler. After introducing me, Cox walked out of the room. I watched him leave and I was scared to death. I knew Cox but I did not know this new priest. Within a minute or two of meeting Wheeler, he was raping me.

There was no grooming involved with Wheeler. It was a full-on attack within a minute or two. The next thing I remember is Wheeler sitting very close to me on my left side talking, blah blah, blah ... I was terrified.

As I had done in the past, I went back to class...to learn...

A day or two later, as I was walking down the hall for recess, I was officially introduced to Wheeler by the principal. He was standing slightly behind her as she was talking. He gave me a stone-cold look that went right through me, as if to say, I will kill you if you say anything about meeting me before. I never said a word about meeting Wheeler or being raped.

I went to public schools after fourth grade.

I attended CCD class at Holy Cross when I was 12 years old. CCD was on Wednesdays after school. Shortly after CCD classes began, my teacher told me that Father wanted to see me. She said I was to go over to the rectory to see him. I had no choice, so I walked over and met with Wheeler. I was raped again by Wheeler. Afterwards, I walked back to the school and hid out in the bathroom until I left for home. I do not think I went back to the CCD classes ever again. I never told anyone what happened.

This was truly horrific. I was a 12-year old girl who had just begun menstruating several months before. Imagine, being a 12-year old girl and having a priest know that you are menstruating. It happened to me...

According to the book "Unto Us A Child: Abuse and Deception in the Catholic Church" by Donald T. Phillips, Wheeler was known as a problem priest for years. He was a problem priest back in the 50s when he was sexually abusing children. Yet, he was sent to Holy Cross in Hutchinson in the 60s and 70s.

As investigations continue around the country and details emerge about clergy abuse, i.e. Colorado and Pennsylvania, the Catholic Church was aware of sexual predators for decades in their churches and schools and continued to provide safe harbor for these priests. Their solution to problem priests was to move them around from parish to parish and school to school.

The Catholic Church should be held accountable for what happened under their roof. For example, I was raped multiple times in the sacristy of the old Holy Cross Church, and in their rectory. They should be held accountable.

More importantly, I should be able to find justice for the harm done to me. No matter how long ago the sexual abuse occurred.

In good faith, my family trusted the church to teach and protect their daughter and granddaughter. The education I received from the church/school was not what my parents sent me to school to learn. No parent wants their child terrorized and abused the way I was terrorized and abused.

Because I am a survivor of sexual abuse as a child, I am a proponent of HB 2306 for allowing victims of child sex abuse to bring a cause of action. But I would like to add an amendment to the bill.

The amendment would allow a two-year look back window for all child sex abuse victims, no matter how long ago the abuse occurred or by whom. The revived statute of limitations would be against perpetrators, private organizations, including the Catholic Church, and government. For example, Delaware had a two year look back window from 2007-2009 that revived SOL against perpetrators, private organizations and government. (According to Child USA, The Think Tank for Child Protection, www.childusa.org)

I would like the Kansas legislators to pass SOL reform by opening a two year look back window for all sexual abuse victims or by eliminating civil SOL altogether.

Thank you for allowing me to share with you a painful, heartbreaking and destructive part of my childhood.

While I no longer reside in Kansas, the roots of my upbringing are here in the heartland of America.