



Lawyer Tracks Priests Accused of Sexual Misconduct To Prevent More Cases of Abuse

[8-11-04 By Regan Morris]

Sylvia Demarest and a legal assistant spent the last 11 years creating a database of priests accused of sexual misconduct. LawCrossing speaks with the Dallas attorney about her hopes for the database and her strong opinions on what needs to be done to improve America.

Sylvia Demarest was outraged when she heard the stories of eight children who had been abused by Catholic Priest Rudy Kos in Dallas. Those children became her clients, and their experience provoked Ms. Demarest to dedicate a large part of her time over the next decade to collecting data on priests accused of sexual misconduct across the country.

Two weeks ago, Ms. Demarest donated her database and almost 100 boxes of accompanying paper files to the organization Bishop Accountability for publication and hopefully expansion.

She hopes her database will protect children and also inspire other attorneys to create similar databases if they are working on abuse cases. And she wants to see the database expanded internationally.

"What I want to see happen, imagine a map of the United States and you can click on a state and that would show the diocese in the state, and then you could click on each diocese and then basically see a history," Ms. Demarest said. "You could also type in a name and get a history of that name."

Ms. Demarest is very critical of how the Catholic Church has handled the abuse that has plagued dioceses across the country. They should create their own national database, she said, and take a more proactive role to protect children before the effects of abuse fester.

In prisons, for example, many of the inmates have been sexually abused. If sexual abuse

victims are treated when they are still young, they will likely become healthier adults, she said.

"I don't understand why society will not get interested in trying to deal with this issue, because it's an issue that goes beyond sexual abuse and the Catholic Church," she said. "It's an issue that we have to deal with at all levels in our society. So what I'm hoping is that by this small contribution on my part that I can sort of let other people know that if you're working on cases like this, why don't you start a database?"

She envisions attorneys compiling files on different religious groups, school teachers, or any group they research that has been accused of abuse.

"It's important to document this and to continue your work in this area, and hopefully we can build up a sufficient amount of information so that scholars and researchers can get a handle on how this happens and why it happens and we can begin to do something about prevention and protection," she said.

Those eight children she originally represented in 1993 with attorney Wendell Turley were awarded \$119 million by a jury.

She worked on the database for 11 years because new names kept coming in and there was no one to donate the list to until Bishop Accountability was formed in the wake of the Boston crisis.

She said her research showed a national trend in how the Catholic Church handled abuse allegations.

"They didn't cooperate with the prosecution of these priests, and of course the victims are so traumatized and ashamed, that they usually blame themselves," she said.

Victims often do not come forward until decades later, and then she said the statute of limitations has passed and the Church says it is too late to do anything.

"So they had a nice little bird's nest on the ground here, and I thought somebody ought to come kick it aside," she said.

Ms. Demarest, 60, is no stranger to shaking things up. After graduating as one of a handful of female attorneys from the University of Texas School of Law, she went to work as a civil rights attorney involved with voting rights and equal education and opportunity. She eventually became executive director of Dallas Legal Services in 1973 and stayed until 1976.

She worked at Turley's firm doing mainly personal injury work until she started her own firm in 1983, the same year she was elected president of the Dallas Trial Lawyers Association.

Ms. Demarest said she has always been civic minded, like many in her generation. She believes people are less inclined to work in public service because the U.S. education system is such a mess.

Ms. Demarest, who grew up poor in a tiny town in rural Louisiana, believes young people have less of a chance to excel today.



"I was born in a rural area, had a very 18th Century-type upbringing. I remember when we got electricity, when we got a paved road. I was the first to graduate from high school. And when I went to college, we still didn't have indoor plumbing," she said.

Ms. Demarest had a lot going against her, and she indirectly credits the Soviet Sputnik satellite with her success. The Soviet launch of the world's first artificial satellite ushered in the space age and the space race.

To compete with the Soviets, the Americans put more emphasis on education at home. In 1958, Al Gore's father, Senator Albert Gore, and Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough created the National Defense Education Act, which gave poor students low-interest student loans and grants for higher education.

"My highest idea at the time was to be a P.E. teacher, because the only thing I really excelled at in my little country school was athletics, and the only awards that I won were most athletic," Ms. Demarest said. "I was the star basketball player. And so, no, the idea never entered my mind that I could aspire to do something like go to law school."

But a grant to attend the University of South Louisiana in Lafayette, about 70 miles from her home, and an encouraging debate teacher convinced Ms. Demarest to go to law school in Texas.

"It was all as a result of the fact that our country at that time encouraged and gave poor kids an opportunity to further their education," she said. "Whereas if it were today, I'm not sure that kids like myself really have the same kind of opportunity. It's totally unfair."

Ms. Demarest said she has paid that money back tenfold in taxes, which would not have been the case if she had remained poor. Ms. Demarest, who was raised Catholic but left the Church as a result of the abuse scandals, still intends to work with Bishop Accountability as a board member, but said she is finished with the daily database. She has been working on Native American issues lately and hopes to help tribes regain some of their past glory.

"I really have no intention of doing any further litigation against the Church," she said. "It's very troubling to read this day after day, and we've been for 11 years wallowing through some of the biggest pile of human perversion you can imagine. It's very tragic."