

Alleged Victims

Jackson family wants closure from the church

BY DONNA LADD

The year was 1970, and 11-year-old Francis Morrison lay in his bed in the big house at 771 Belhaven St., listening for heavy footsteps, the covers pulled all the way up to his neck, his eyes squeezed tight in pretend sleep. His heart racing, he wondered if his room would be the first stop for nightly prayers.

The footfalls of a portly man grew louder as they mounted the stairs. Suddenly, Francis' door opened, and George Broussard walked in to "tuck in" the young man, the oldest son of his dear friends, Dorothy and Francis "Doc" Morrison. Francis smelled the blend of sherry and cigars before the priest reached his twin bed and sat down beside him. George's trembling fleshy hand, with excess fat overlapping his large ring, then reached underneath the blanket and toward Francis' soft pajama bottoms, a look of confident desire on his corpulent face.

Francis didn't swat away his elder's hand. He had learned in months past that it wouldn't do any good. Besides, God had told him, through George, that he was special, that he had a unique connection with the Almighty. As he felt George's eager touch, young Francis braced himself for a routine he had grown used to. Even though Broussard, the leader of the children's choir that Francis loved to sing in at St. Peter's Cathedral, had told him it was OK, he still felt ashamed. He couldn't tell his parents because he didn't want to disappoint them, or George, or God. He was an altar boy with a strong sense of duty, and he had to set a good example for his two little brothers.

So Francis kept quiet until George was finished and left his room. He nearly always collapsed into a deep sleep right after the priest left; as he dozed off, he prayed that George was done for the night.

'There really was no bad'

Dorothy Morrison, then Daniels, had grown up a very happy and carefree young woman in Brooksville, Miss., near Columbus, the daughter of Methodists. Her father, a storekeeper, made a good living for the family, and they learned to enjoy life, making friends and their own fun. "There really was no bad," she remembers.

The young woman moved to Jackson to become a medical technician. Here she would meet her future husband, Francis Morrison, a med student at University Medical Center who grew up in Chicago, working various jobs—hawking flowers, tending apartment buildings, selling Christmas trees, delivering newspapers—to further himself and his education. Probably

because his father was an artist, and an Irish Catholic, Fran had a passion for both culture and the church.

"His being Catholic was the only drawback as far as my parents were concerned," Dorothy says. "There were no Catholics in Brooksville; they were considered foreigners."

But she and her parents totally accepted Fran's faith. "I knew he could never be a Protestant, ever," she says. And she thought all the ceremony of Catholicism was neat, although she didn't understand the papal devotion: "The Pope was not something I could ever accept. They said, 'It will come with time and prayer.' It never did come."

After taking Catholic instructions at St. Peter's, Dorothy converted. She and Fran were married in 1958, in the Catholic Church in Columbus. She was 25; he was 27.

'Good place to raise children'

Dorothy and Fran's early life together was hand-to-mouth and very mobile. He took an internship in hematology at the University of Pennsylvania. Dorothy was thrilled to see the world beyond Mississippi. In Philadelphia, their first two sons were born: Francis Jr. in 1959 and Thomas in 1962. They soon moved to Boston where Kenneth was born in 1964; there Fran's income came into its own, and Dorothy left her med-tech job to raise her boys.

After several years in Boston, the U.S. Navy dispatched Fran to London where he worked at the Chelsea Naval Hospital, and his family soaked up English culture. "We had a blast," Dorothy says. "We got hardship pay for living in London! We thought it was a joke."

Back in the states, Fran's best job offer was exactly where Dorothy didn't want it to be: the University Medical Center in Jackson where he would have a chance to build a hematology division. They moved back in 1969.

"I cried all the way back," Dorothy says with a laugh. Ultimately, though, she had decided it was a smart move: "We thought it would be a good place to raise children." It was a rough time in Jackson, though—integration was just being enforced—and the Morrisons, although open-minded themselves and supporters of public schools, enrolled their sons at St. Richard Catholic School to shield them from the emotional anguish of integration.

Here the Morrisons would be part of a smart, cultured community—starting with the Catholic Church. They joined St. Peter's and starting meeting progressive-minded people like vicar general Bernard Francis Law, who was heralded for his civil rights work in the state.

"The boys became altar boys right away," Dorothy says. "St. Peter's didn't have that many children; they were thrilled when we came and had three boys." The boys—by then 5, 7 and 9—all liked to sing and joined the children's choir. The family constantly attended rectory parties where the sons could play with other children and the parents could enjoy

brunches and fine meals, sip coffee and drink wine, and engage in witty repartee and intellectual chat with their new friends—especially the pastor George Broussard.

“The boys were fond of him, and he became fonder and fonder of the boys,” Dorothy says. “Fran was really proud of that; our best friend was also the boys’ friend; what better example could there be for the boys?”

‘You are a special boy’

By all accounts, young Thomas Morrison was having a golden childhood, a repeat of his mother’s idyllic upbringing, but with more means. He was the middle child, the artist, the romantic. His older brother Francis—the quieter straight shooter who was destined to become a Republican and a no-nonsense businessman—often rolled his eyes at the young dreamer. He also worried that George was hurting him, too.

At first, Thomas adored George, who would often load him into his car and drive to the Morrises’ lake house in Madison County, just the two of them. “He couldn’t wait to get out of his priest’s clothes and into civilian clothes, and get out to the lake,” Thomas says now.

At the house, situated right on Lake Lorman, George would cook tantalizing meals, teaching Thomas—and the other boys when they were there—how to make fresh pasta and what ingredients would turn a bland meal into something special, a talent Thomas still has today. “He didn’t have a family of his own, so he liked being a part of other people’s families,” Thomas says.

The boys were drawn to George’s warmth. And he would do quirky things, like drive the kids around in an old hearse. “It was a lot fun until all the ugliness,” Thomas says.

Thomas, now a 41-year-old Jackson artist and the divorced father of a young son, doesn’t know exactly when it got ugly with George: “I don’t remember a first time; they’re all lumped together.” Thomas was 8 or 9 when George started coming to his room in Belhaven and fondling him at the lake house. Sometimes, when he and George were alone at the lake house, he says, the priest would tell him to walk around without his underwear.

“I remember all the ugly lies he’d tell to cover up,” Thomas says. “He’d say, ‘This is a wonderful, wonderful thing between you, me and God. You are a special boy.’”

When Thomas got ready to go to bed, George would often stand up and tell his parents that he would help him say his prayers. He would follow Thomas to his bedroom and start breathing heavy and then rest his elbow across the boy’s pelvis to firmly pin him down. “After a certain period, I figured it was normal,” Thomas says. “I was wondering what my wing-wing was all about; he made me sexually aware at a very young age. I wouldn’t have known it was down there if he hadn’t come and started fondling it.”

Dorothy and Fran never suspected that George was

doing anything he shouldn’t. “Not once. Today people are more aware. There was no awareness then. Nobody knew. No one talked at that time about sexual things,” she says now, sitting in the living room of the lake house.

George’s schemes wreaked havoc with young Thomas’ mind. While Francis was old enough to fear what the priest was doing to his brothers by then—and to hide from him under his dad’s Volvo station wagon—Thomas was so confused by his elder’s actions that he would get jealous when “Big George” paid too much attention to his little brother Kenneth. “Sometimes he would take Kenneth out to the lake house, and I’d get pissed off,” he says.

‘I’m getting help’

One night in 1973, Dr. Francis Morrison—by then known through Jackson as “Doc”—was sitting in the den of his Belhaven home when the phone rang. It was another parishioner calling to tell him that George had tried to touch his son in a sexual way. The caller knew the priest spent a lot of time with the Morrison boys; he thought Doc would want to know.

Fran went immediately to the bedroom to tell Dorothy. “I believe him,” Fran said. He left the bedroom to talk to Francis and Thomas. He sat them down on his den sofa and asked if George had ever touched them there. “Yes,” Fran answered. Then Thomas: “Well, yeah.”

Angry and mortified, Fran picked up the phone and called George over to the house and pointblank asked him if he had ever fondled Francis and Thomas. A teary George admitted it, saying, “What I’ve been doing to you and your boys is wrong; I’m getting help,” Dorothy remembers. Fran then made him apologize to his two oldest sons.

Fran made George call Bishop Joseph Brunini, confess and ask for help. Fran also talked with vicar general Law (who said in a legal deposition in 2002 that George had told him of his “inappropriate affection” and “boundary violations” toward the Morrison children). The church, including Law, assured them that they would get help for George, Dorothy says, and report the abuse so it wouldn’t happen again. Fran accepted the promise, believing that the incidents could not possibly continue now that church officials knew. The parish did not remove George; in fact, he continued working at St. Peter’s for over a year after that before being moved to the Waveland parish on the Coast.

After that night, the family wasn’t sure how to talk about abuse, and seldom did. “We were embarrassed, guilty; we were just discovering it was bad,” says Francis, now a 44-year-old businessman and father of two in McKinney, Texas. He says their father told them that it was important to move forward and forgive; it wouldn’t happen again. “That’s what the bishop and the church would have told him,” Francis says. “I know he bought it.”

Francis says it was a different time then; if the same thing happened to his own children now, “I’d be hard-pressed not

to shoot them. I'd go to jail because I'd kill them." But, he adds, he does not hold his father's trusting response against him: "I couldn't hate my father," he says.

However, for many years, one son did hate his father. It had never occurred to Fran Morrison to ask young Kenneth, by then 9, if George had touched him, too.

What about me?

Little Kenneth Morrison had eavesdropped from the stairs on that pivotal 1973 night, listening to his father trying to be gentle as he questioned Francis and Thomas. When he heard them leaving the room, Kenneth dove into his bed, waiting for his father's footsteps. They didn't come. "He doesn't care about me," he remembers thinking. "I hated my father for a long time after that."

Kenneth's earliest memory is of being abused by George Broussard, which started for him at about age 5. "I used to not have any memories prior to age 13—other than of being abused," he says now, chain-smoking as his mother and two brothers do. Dorothy has happy-looking family photos of Kenneth doing fun things with the rest of them: water skiing, laughing, playing. But, to him, all that might as well be "familial folklore," as he calls it.

"I don't recall having fun as a kid," he says. When he thinks of childhood, he recalls being molested and religion, often in the same thought. He remembers wearing his altar boy robes that made him so hot; George would tell him not to wear any clothes underneath the cassock. Then, "he'd get me in the confessional," he says. Perhaps because no one knew about Kenneth, George kept abusing him over the year after he confessed to Fran.

"It was horrifying," he says. "I can still taste George's sherry; his tongue felt like sandpaper. It's hard to talk about. I can taste it right now." George would lie on top of little Kenneth, reeking of garlic, his hairy chest scratching his nose and cheeks. "I was smothered; no one would hear me if cried out; I felt disgusted."

Kenneth responded with self-hatred and self-abuse—and nastiness toward others, including friends and family. Even though his brothers both would deal with depression, addictive behavior and other emotional issues, they all readily admit that Kenneth was hit the worst. He started overeating at 14, was chronically depressed at St. Joseph High School; in college, he abused drugs including cocaine and LSD, and he tried to drink himself to death, literally, one time with five bottles of Mad Dog 20-20. Kenneth attended myriad colleges, several Catholic, after trying to study chemistry, philosophy, theology. In Jackson, he would drink himself silly at W.C. Don's and host wild drug parties; he delighted in shocking his father at every turn.

"Dad and I didn't speak for several years," Kenneth says. "We'd speak through mother. I was spinning out of control." Kenneth was suicidal: At a New Hampshire monastery, he walked out on a thin sheet of ice, fell through and just stood there in the frozen

water. He went to dangerous areas of El Salvador hoping to get shot; he got shot at, but never shot. He tried to O.D. a few times.

My sons, please forgive me

His family would learn Kenneth's secret one Christmas Eve when he came from one of his colleges for Christmas, and his father became furious because he refused to attend midnight mass. "It's tradition!" Fran boomed. "That's what families do!"

Kenneth exploded back: "Don't you know what it does to me to sit in that church and smell the incense?" he yelled back. "I'm not about to go to a place where that man (molested) me on the altar, behind the altar, in the confessional and in the basement!"

Fran stared at him, shocked. "The light bulb went on," Dorothy says. Fran went to mass without Kenneth; during the ceremony, he started weeping uncontrollably. The next day, Fran told his youngest son: "I never thought George would have done something like that to someone so young." But little more was said.

Dorothy is haunted by the fact that she never asked Kenneth if he had been abused. "I must have been the most stupid mother in the world to not talk to them more," she says. But there just wasn't a language for such a talk: "maybe because it was so distasteful." And until that Christmas Eve, Fran had sincerely believed that George could be redeemed and had stayed in touch with him. "At one time, he believed in forgiveness and redemption," Dorothy says. Now disillusioned, Fran turned away from the church.

Fran learned that he was dying from liver cancer in 1999 and only had a couple months to live. One by one, he called his sons to his side. He apologized to each of them for not knowing about the abuse and stopping it. Fran told his sons he did not understand pedophilia back then, that George couldn't be cured as easily as he had hoped. He wanted them each to know he loved them, even if he did not prevent the ugliness. It was the only substantive conversation any of the boys had about the abuse with their father, a man whose faith and innocence was shattered right alongside theirs.

"I don't like what it did to my Dad," says Thomas, sitting under pine trees at the lake house in April. "They lied to him, and kept right on abusing children. I have no f—ing forgiveness for people like that. They destroyed his faith, made him feel like a bad father. You shouldn't have to live through that."

Kenneth says now: "When he was dying, he asked me if I forgave him." He told him yes.

Seeking closure, \$48 million

In January 2002 the dam broke on the Catholic priest sex scandals in Boston. Sitting in three different cities, the brothers and their mother watched hundreds of victims coming forward, bringing with them the invigorating realization that

they were all part of a much larger community they never knew existed: the big family of victims of priests.

The voice of Bernard Law, by then the archbishop in Boston, saying that he knew of no cases of sexual abuse before the 1980s, rattled the Morrison family. Kenneth remembers: “I heard Law on public radio and thought, ‘That’s a bald-faced lie.’ What about my father in 1973, when they talked about this?”

Kenneth, now the center of a thriving arts community in Chicago, called his mother to say he wanted to sue the church. Both brothers soon came on board, with Francis first wanting to be “John Doe” and then climbing on board whole-hog and with his real name in the national media. They wanted the church to pay for harboring a sexual predator, moving him around to potentially abuse other children, and then pretending it all never happened. They had found their voice. “Thirty years ago, we didn’t know we had recourse,” Dorothy says.

Two years ago next week, on June 12, 2002, the Morrison family filed a \$3 million lawsuit in Hinds County Circuit Court against Law, former Jackson Bishop William R. Houck, the Jackson diocese and Broussard, who has since left the priesthood and lives in Houma, La. They are alleging that church officials engaged in a “civil conspiracy” to hide their sexual molestation in the early 1970s by failing to report the abuse to state authorities when they were told about it. The lawsuit, which also seeks \$36 million in punitive damages, charges that Law did not take action against Broussard after he told Fran that he would and with a pattern of covering up sexual crimes by priests as has been alleged in numerous other lawsuits in the country. Law, whom Kenneth used to call “Uncle Bernie,” resigned his Boston position in January 2003 due to the scandal.

To date, at least 21 total defendants have come forward saying they were molested in Jackson during that period. Broussard, now 69, is not speaking publicly about the case, although right after it was filed, he told the Boston Globe that no one ever accused him of sexual misconduct when he was priest (which Law’s deposition refuted). He accused the Morrisons of “climbing on the bandwagon.” Later the same day, though, he weakened his denial: “I’m neither affirming nor denying the allegations.”

‘Alleged victims’

The Morrisons’ case is not open and shut; since the hundreds of “alleged victims,” as newspapers routinely refer to them, filed their lawsuits, the Church has fought back on every legal front, resisting subpoenas, withholding names of abusers, sometimes even suing victims.

Even though the church declared a “zero tolerance” policy against sexual abuse by priests in 2002, its lawyers have attempted to seal the records of abuse, thus limiting the evidence against (and needed to expose) abusers. And

it has been near impossible to extract apologies from the church—which some victims want more than anything—because lawyers fear they will be used as evidence in court.

A prime hurdle for the Morrisons is that the statute of limitations on suing a priest for sexual abuse has run out for all three. However, the Morrison case is considered legally pivotal because they argue that they did not know what they know now in time to meet the statute of limitations—due to the civil conspiracy that suppressed information about Law’s and other officials’ cover-up of the abuse and transferrals of the priests to other parishes.

Many Catholics blame the victims for bringing a dark cloud over the church. Bishop Joseph Latino, who took Houck’s place in Jackson, told the Associated Press last year: “I wonder sometimes if the victims aren’t being made victims again by S.N.A.P. and the press,” he said. He also, however, publicly apologized to victims of priest sexual abuse in Jackson and vowed to deal with it “strongly, consistently and effectively” going forward.

Can the church fix itself?

The Morrisons and other victims, however, do not trust the church to repair itself. Reports released in February, commissioned by American Catholic bishops, reveal a strong subculture that allowed rampant pedophilia in the church. At least 4 percent of U.S. priests over a span 52 years were involved. A report that many believe vastly under-reports victims because it is self-reported by bishops still found that 10,667 children were allegedly abused by 4,392 priests from 1950 to 2002.

At least 7 percent of the abusers performed oral sex on the victim, and at least a fourth either tried to or performed actual intercourse (which the Morrisons do not recall happening to them), and 149 priests saw more than 10 accusations each and accounted for more than a quarter of all the cases.

The reports singled out Law, 72, for not trying to reverse the patterns or change the culture. But mere days ago, on May 28, Pope John Paul II announced that Law was named as archpriest of St. Mary Major Basilica, one of the four most important basilicas in Rome.

Families like the Morrisons believe radical measures are needed, including lawsuits that punish and deter future abuse with high monetary damages. “That’s the only way to get them to the table,” Francis says. “None of us expect to get rich and retire on this.” Francis also believes the church owes his family a debt: “Sure as hell it does.”

Perhaps most important to the Morrisons is Fran’s memory. “I think my Dad was not happy with the way he handled it,” Thomas says. “He would be very happy now.”

The details of the narrative scenes in the story are based on interviews with the Morrison family. George Broussard has publicly denied sexually abusing the three boys. Phone calls to Broussard’s home were not answered.