

Six more men join Morning Star suit

Two accuse priest of sex abuse; Weitensteiner denies claims

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Six more men sued Morning Star Boys' Ranch on Friday, including two who accuse the ranch's longtime director of sexual abuse.

The two men allege in documents filed in Spokane County Superior Court that the Rev. Joseph Weitensteiner molested them in separate incidents in the 1970s and '80s during boat trips on Lake Coeur d'Alene.

In a statement released by Morning Star, Weitensteiner denied the allegations. Morning Star said Weitensteiner recently passed a polygraph test.

"I have never been sexually inappropriate with any child at any time," Weitensteiner said. "Why would these people make accusations that they must know, as I know, never happened?"

The 73-year-old Catholic priest left the ranch in July after published allegations that he had physically abused boys in his care at the facility south of Spokane in previous decades. Weitensteiner became the ranch's director in 1966 and transformed it into one of the state's most respected boys ranches.

The documents made public on Friday are amendments to a lawsuit first filed in August, when two former residents alleged they were sexually abused by Morning Star counselors in the 1960s and 1980s.

Tim Kosnoff, a Seattle attorney representing all eight men, said the documents were filed this week to meet a deadline for a legal proceeding in January. Kosnoff said his clients lived in fear at the boys ranch, yet had kept the alleged abuse secret for years.

"We are going to hear over the course of this litigation some of the most appalling accounts of mistreatment yet in this whole scandal," Kosnoff said. "As more and more victims come forward, hopefully we will be able to piece together the truth of what went on."

Founded by the Catholic Diocese of Spokane in the 1950s, the boys ranch has gained renown for counseling and caring for nearly 1,300 troubled boys, ages 10 to 18.

Weitensteiner joined the ranch in 1957 as a counselor. A former butcher, interior decorator and Boy Scout leader, Weitensteiner was ordained a Catholic priest in 1966, and became Morning Star's director the same year.

According to the court documents, in the early 1970s, Weitensteiner took one of the residents on a boat on Lake Coeur d'Alene and molested the boy. The lawsuit also alleges the priest abused the boy at least three other times.

Another resident alleged that Weitensteiner molested him on the boat in the 1980s and that the boy kicked the priest in the face, according to the documents.

Like all six of the new plaintiffs, that alleged victim is identified in court documents only by his initials. But, when contacted by The Spokesman-Review on Friday, 30-year-old Kenneth Putnam agreed to release his name publicly. Putnam also alleges he was sexually assaulted by another counselor at the ranch.

"I don't care how it affects me," Putnam said about releasing his name. "But if there's some kid out there who can say, 'If this guy can stand up, then so can I' ... that's what matters to me."

Putnam disclosed that he has a criminal background including drug-related convictions and is currently on home detention for negligent driving. The Spokesman-Review was unable to examine Putnam's criminal history late Friday.

Putnam said he remains angry about the years he spent at Morning Star.

"I've tried to go back there and see if I can forgive and forget, and I can't," Putnam said. "I would like to see that place closed down."

At the request of Morning Star, The Spokesman-Review provided the documents to the ranch late Friday.

Bob Durgan, the board president, said Weitensteiner was "devastated" by the allegations.

"To suggest that there has been a pattern of negligence at Morning Star in its mission to reach out to young men in need is outrageous," Durgan said in a press statement. "To accuse Father Joe Weitensteiner of sexually abusing children is outrageous."

In the past few months, former residents and community members have defended Weitensteiner as a paragon of virtue and devotion to the boys ranch. Named to Gonzaga Prep's Hall of Fame, Weitensteiner was also appointed as the Northwest representative to a national accreditation board for group homes in 1978.

At St. Patrick's Parish in northeast Spokane, where Weitensteiner served as a priest in the 1990s, one parish official referred to him as "Jesus in Hillyard," according to newspaper archives.

State documents from the Department of Social and Health Services credit Weitensteiner with turning around conditions at the ranch. The documents indicate that Morning Star's founding director, the Rev. Marvin LaVoy, was forced out of his position in the 1960s and the ranch was in "disarray."

The documents filed Friday allege that LaVoy, who died in 1994, sexually abused one boy at the ranch in the 1950s and another in the 1960s.

One of the alleged victims, identified in court documents as W.C., said in an interview that he reported the abuse to the Catholic Diocese several years ago. The diocese has not responded to repeated requests from The Spokesman-Review to release records regarding LaVoy.

W.C. provided his name to a reporter but declined to release it publicly, in part because he has never disclosed the abuse to his children. He said he changed his name and moved across the country to escape his past.

"It might sound strange, how can you remember 50 years ago?" the 59-year-old man said. "But I do. I remember how I felt when he was having sex with me."

In the past year, numerous allegations of physical and sexual abuse – some dating back decades – have roiled the ranch. In 2004, Morning Star settled a lawsuit with a former resident who claimed that a counselor repeatedly raped him.

In June, The Spokesman-Review reported on the death of Timothy Donald Everts, a 15-year-old Spokane boy who killed himself in 1978 after telling friends and family he had been physically and sexually abused at Morning Star. Everts told a friend that a Catholic priest named Patrick O'Donnell sexually abused him at the ranch.

According to the documents filed on Friday, two former residents allege that O'Donnell removed them from Morning Star and sexually assaulted them in the '60s and '70s. One of the residents, identified as P.B., said he told Weitensteiner of the abuse but "nothing was ever done about it," according to the filing.

P.B. alleges that two older boys raped him at Morning Star in the 1970s and that he reported the abuse to Weitensteiner, who told him to "learn how to protect himself," according to the court documents. P.B. alleges he was raped an additional 12 to 15 times by the older boys after he reported the abuse.

Weitensteiner cited stress-related health problems when he went on leave in July.

In an interview last summer, Weitensteiner admitted striking a boy in the face with an open hand, and acknowledged hitting boys with a paddle hard enough to leave bruises. But he denied several more serious allegations of physical assault from former counselors and residents.

Morning Star phased out corporal punishment in the 1980s.

The ranch said Weitensteiner passed a polygraph test about the alleged sexual abuse "with flying colors."

"These allegations have hurt me deeply, but I have confidence that those who know me and have worked with me throughout my career know what is real," Weitensteiner said.

The boys ranch is independent from the Catholic Diocese, which is in bankruptcy court facing multimillion-dollar claims of priest sex abuse.