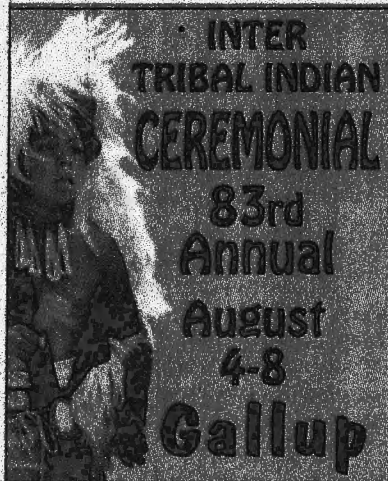


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Navajo woman alleges sex assault by Gallup priest

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola
Staff Writer

GALLUP — For one Navajo woman, the month of July brings back difficult memories that wash across her heart and mind with painful regularity like the monsoon rains that wash across the dry country of the Navajo Reservation

Thirty years ago this month the woman was seriously injured in an accident. And thirty years ago, the woman says, she and another teen-

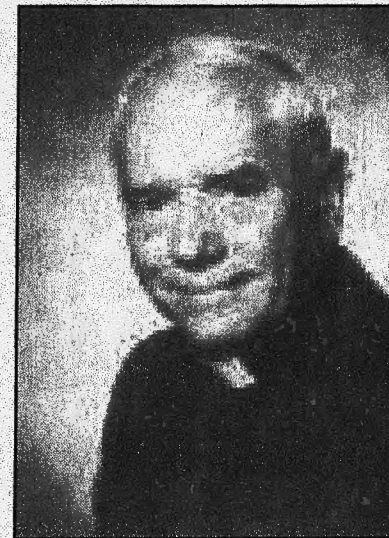
age girl were sexually assaulted in the Gallup Indian Medical Center by a Roman Catholic priest from Wisconsin who was working as a hospital chaplain for the Diocese of Gallup.

The woman, now a teacher on the Navajo Reservation, came forward to The Independent last month after reading the newspaper's most recent article about James Burns, the former Gallup Diocese priest who is now facing civil and

criminal charges by a Winslow, Ariz. man who claims Burns sexually abused him as a teenager.

According to the woman, who asked to use the pseudonym of Ella to protect her privacy, the priest who assaulted her was also named James. Through information provided by the Diocese of Gallup, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and biographical information posted on the

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Father James
Schlafler

Navajo woman

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Internet about the late Father James Schlaffer, The Independent was able to verify many of the facts as presented by the woman.

The assault

In July of 1974, Ella was an 18-year-old girl who had recently graduated from high school and had just landed her first job. Early one morning, on her first day of work, she was walking on the shoulder of a reservation road when a car strayed too far off the road and hit Ella.

After being rushed to the nearest Indian Health Service hospital, Ella was transferred to the Gallup Indian Medical Center. She believes within a week of becoming a patient in the orthopedic ward, she was assaulted by Father James Schlaffer.

She was lying immobilized in bed with her fractured leg suspended in traction when the priest entered her room. Ella was familiar with Catholic priests because she had been raised a Catholic. One of her uncles had been a guide and interpreter for some of the early Franciscan missionaries at the St. Michael's Mission in Arizona. Because of his deep respect for those missionaries, many members of his family had converted to Catholicism.

To 18-year-old Ella, the priest looked like the Hollywood actor, Lee Marvin. He was a middle-aged white man of medium build, with thinning blond hair.

"I was in pain and he asked me where I was hurting," Ella recalled. After learning that Ella was experiencing severe pain in her fractured leg, the priest offered to pray for her.

Ella agreed, but felt surprised and uneasy when he placed his hand on her leg. She was also uncomfortably aware that because her leg was suspended in traction, her hospital gown was not adequately covering her body.

With her eyes closed in prayer, Ella was stunned to realize the priest's hand had moved up her leg and was now probing her vaginal area. "I was stunned," she said. "It took me a while to collect myself."

Ella recalled she tried to grab his hand and twist it, and when that failed, she began to hit his hand. She remembers crying out something like, "Why are you doing this? Why are you here?"

According to Ella, the priest stepped back and turned the tables of guilt on her. He said she was a disturbed young woman and that she was on so many pain medications she was imagining things.

A few days later, Ella said, the priest returned to her room. By that time, she recalled, she was feeling angry and told the priest she wanted him out of her room because she knew what he had done to her.

Schlaffer angered Ella further when he tried to tell her she was having feelings of attraction for him, something that priests frequently experience. He told her she was in denial about her attraction. Ella said she responded by throwing a box of tissue at him and screaming.

When a nurse's assistant came to investigate the commotion, Schlaffer told the woman Ella was an emotional young woman going through a difficult time. Ella said she insisted the priest be asked to leave her room, and she requested the nursing assistant put a note in her medical record that she didn't want any more visits from him.

Ella did not tell the nursing assistant what had happened to her.

Secret for years

Ella believes that about a month or so later, another patient in the ward, a teenage girl from Church Rock, N.M., joined Ella in her room for a Sunday afternoon board game. As the girls were playing, Schlaffer walked by Ella's room.

The other girl made a face and said she didn't like him. When Ella asked why, the girl called Schlaffer a "nasty priest" and explained that he had put his hand under her blouse and fondled her. She also had not reported the incident to anyone on the hospital staff.

Ella said she can no longer remember the other girl's name, but she remembers the girl was hospitalized due to injuries sustained in an automobile accident. Coincidentally, Ella and the other girl shared the same birthday in late April, but Ella believes the girl was a year younger. Today, the other girl would be a woman in her mid to late 40s.

The last conversation Ella had with Schlaffer was when she was being transported to the physical therapy department. Schlaffer was passing by in the hallway, and Ella said her sense of curiosity prompted her to ask him if he really was a Catholic priest.

"He described himself as a 'modern priest,'" Ella recalled. Schlaffer even bragged to her that he read "Playboy"—for the articles.

Ella said she kept Schlaffer's sexual assault a secret for years. "I was really ashamed," she said. "It was 1974," she added. "Nobody talked about things like that."

She also said she never could bring herself to share the painful incident with either her mother or father. But after Albuquerque, N.M. attorney Bruce E. Pasternack began filing his many priest abuse lawsuits in the early 1990s, Ella did share her story with her nieces and nephews as a way to warn them about sexual predators.

Schlaffer's assault effectively ended her life as a practicing Catholic. Coming on the heels of her accident and hospitalization, Ella said, her assault by a Catholic priest was emotionally and spiritually devastating.

"It happened to me when I needed spiritual guidance... when I needed support," she said. Although she still believes in a supreme Creator, Ella said she has no use for the Catholic faith.

After becoming a mother, she did send her son to Gallup Catholic School but only for the education. "It was purely for educational reasons," she explained. "It wasn't for the religion."

For thirty years, Ella's life has been affected by Schlaffer's assault. "I get depressed about it," she said. "The impact is still with me."

Ella said she is "still struggling" with the issue of why the Catholic Church reassigned so many sexually abusive priests after their abuse had been reported and often documented. Information provided by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee indicates Schlaffer may have been one of those reassigned priests.

"I'm appalled," she said of the reassignments. "And I don't think they've been very honest about that."

Tracking Schlaffer

After Ella contacted The Independent with her story, the newspaper found Schlaffer listed as a chaplain for the Diocese of Gallup in the 1975 Official Catholic Directory, with the notation that he was from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

An Internet search found a reference to Schlaffer as a pastor at St. Joseph's parish in Racine, Wis. in 1967. He served there only briefly before being reassigned as a chaplain for a senior citizens' home. According to the website, which includes a photo of Schlaffer, the priest died on Aug. 22, 1998.

Officials from the Diocese of Gallup and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee both researched their files on Schlaffer and provided information to The Independent.

Deacon Timoteo Lujan, the chancellor for the Gallup Diocese, confirmed that the James Schlaffer who served as a hospital chaplain here was ordained by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in 1945. After a temporary assignment in Potlatch, Idaho, Schlaffer was invited to work in the Diocese of Gallup by the late Bishop Jerome Hastrich.

In an e-mail to The Independent, Lujan said a letter in Schlaffer's file indicates the priest was the chaplain at McKinley General Hospital, the Gallup Indian Medical Center, and the McKinley Manor nursing home from June 6, 1974 to May 5, 1975.

"There are no documents, notes or anything that suggest any problems of any kind," wrote Lujan. "There are no other known allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct in the file." Lujan closed his e-mail with the request that Ella come forward to the diocese and make a formal allegation about the abuse.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee, however, does have allegations of sexual misconduct against Schlaffer in its file, according to Kathleen Hohl, the archdiocese's interim director of communications. "The Archdiocese of Milwaukee received allegations of unwanted advances by Fr. Schlaffer toward adult women who resided in southeastern Wisconsin," Hohl stated in her e-mail to The Independent.

Hohl provided a chronological listing of Schlaffer's priestly assignments from 1945 through 1984. After Schlaffer's assignment at St. Joseph's in Racine, Hohl lists him in 1969 as taking a "leave of absence for medical reasons." Racine is located in southeastern Wisconsin. Schlaffer is then listed as being assigned as chaplain at the senior citizens' home in 1971. Three years later he surfaced in Gallup.

Hohl declined to comment on the exact nature of Schlaffer's medical treatment. "Any medical treatment a clergy member receives is part of that individual's private personnel file," she wrote, "and our policy is not to release such information."

However, Hohl also urged Ella to contact the Archdiocese of Milwaukee's Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Services Office with her allegation.

Editor's Note: Anyone who believes they have been sexually abused by a representative of the Diocese of Gallup can file a complaint with the Gallup Diocesan Review Board on Juvenile Sexual Abuse, P.O. Box 3932, Gallup, N.M. 87305. Investigations into allegations can only be made if the victim provides their full name and contact information to the review board. According to the review board, anonymous allegations will be kept on file but will not be investigated.