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Dark secrets surface: Two boys, now men, claim abuse by school custodian in the 1970s



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The former Adams Memorial Middle School, now vacant, was the site of numerous acts of child sexual abuse in the mid-1970s by a former custodian who has acknowledged the incidents.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE



Posted Friday, August 18, 2017 11:36 pm

Editor's note: This story contains graphic content that may not be suitable for some readers.

By Bob Dunn

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ADAMS — When William Howcroft was visiting his hometown for his father's birthday back in 2006, he stopped by Adams Memorial Junior High School, where he had been a student in the mid-1970s.

"The school was empty, but the doors were wide open," Howcroft said. "I could look through the doors. ... I saw the janitorial closet, and there was another one across the hallway where it sometimes happened."

What happened, Howcroft, said, was he and at least one other student were molested multiple times by a school custodian named Clement St. Hilaire.

He said the assaults happened during the school year and in the summer between his seventh and eighth grade.

"He'd meet me at the school and the school was empty, so it made it very easy for him," Howcroft said.

"I went into the boy's room where he had a storage closet just past the boy's communal shower," he said. "He always used to use that as an excuse to watch the boys shower naked. He sometimes abused me back there as well."

It was in that custodial closet, illuminated by flashlight, that Howcroft said he was first sexually assaulted.

Howcroft said he was drawn to revisit the Columbia Street school building that day.

"I just wanted to refresh my mind that it actually all really happened," he said.

Howcroft kept those experiences from his family, friends and the school itself, never revealing them until well into adulthood, when he talked to a former classmate and learned that he, too, had been molested by St. Hilaire.

"I was scared and I was ashamed," Howcroft said. "[St. Hilaire] did tell me not to tell anyone. He didn't threaten me, but he didn't want me talking about it.

"I never really forgot that it happened. I just never allowed myself to think about it. Because it was just too hard."

'Absence of proof'

The two men, now both 53, first contacted The Eagle last year and, in separate interviews, gave parallel accounts of how they were lured in by St. Hilaire and molested on multiple occasions in 1976.

Neither revealed the assaults to anyone until they were in their late 40s — and well after they left behind the school and town. Authorities learned of the accusations against St. Hilaire in 2008, long after the statute of limitations had expired.

In 2008, Howcroft was told by police that the statute of limitations in child rape/sexual assault cases is 15 years after the crime is reported to police or 15 years after the victim reaches age 16, whichever comes first.

When interviewed by The Eagle at his home in Adams, St. Hilaire, who retired in 1976 and is now 94, did not contest the men's accounts.

In correspondence with the attorney representing the two men, St. Hilaire even apologized for his actions.

"I wish to be dead," St. Hilaire wrote in one of his letters.

St. Hilaire said he lost his job over the matter, although there is no record of the school district taking any action at the time.

In 2016, a lawyer representing the two men contacted the Adams-Cheshire School Committee, which, in turn, hired a lawyer to investigate. That investigation concluded there was an "absence of proof" to support the claim, and the school committee took no action.

That investigation, however, did not include interviews with the two men. The investigation also registered that St. Hilaire denied the accusations, and it relied in part on "district records" to reach its conclusion.

Both men believe they were not the only ones to have been molested. Each of them learned about the opportunity to work after school for St. Hilaire from another student, who already was working for him. And they went to work for St. Hilaire who paid them a couple of dollars to do

light custodial work, like sweeping floors and emptying trash cans, around the building.

It also gave St. Hilaire easy access to students, according to Howcroft and "Frank," the second victim, who agreed to speak with The Eagle on the condition his real name not be used.

St. Hilaire began to show the boys pornographic magazines and then molest them, once they were aroused.

"You're talking about 11- and 12-year-old boys — going through puberty — and you know, pictures of naked girls are attractive to a 12-year-old boy," Frank said. "He would use that as a lure."

Frank said the assaults gradually became more invasive.

"It kind of turned into mutually looking at the magazines, the guy was asking questions, I recall. 'Have you ever seen your dad naked? How big is your dad's penis? Have you ever seen your sister naked?' Things of this nature," he said.

"And, the first couple of times, he kind of backed off," Frank said.

"But then it happened again. He'd unzip his pants and he'd unzip my pants and it got to the point where, at that age, I know when something's wrong. He started ejaculating me and forced me to ejaculate him."

"That was my first sexual experience right there," Frank said.

Howcroft, who now lives in Australia, described himself as an insecure kid.

"I've been told later on by a counselor that people like [St. Hilaire] they don't go after the strong ones; they go after the weak ones."

He said if nothing else, he wants people to know the abuse happened.

"I feel like I want the community to know how little the school has done from the very start, up until the present," Howcroft said. "We've never even gotten an apology from them."

"They never talked to us when it happened," he said. "They just swept it under the rug, kept things quiet."

"In some ways, I've forgiven [St. Hilaire]," Howcroft said. "But my anger lies more with the school."

"What we really wanted was an apology, and they wouldn't give us that," he said. "If a child gets abused by a school employee tomorrow, what will the school do then?"

A 2014 change to Massachusetts law expanded the statute of limitations for filing civil suits against alleged molesters, and both men could have pursued that avenue against St. Hilaire, but chose not to, according to their attorney, Matthew Fogelman.

Committee investigates

Fogelman contacted the Adams-Cheshire Regional School Committee in February 2016 and requested a nonspecific settlement and the hope of achieving some emotional closure. In the absence of a settlement, Fogelman said he would file a suit against the district, according to a statement released by the School Committee in January.

Fogelman said there was talk about some kind of financial settlement with the school, but it was not the men's primary motivation. The attorney declined to reveal specifics of any financial discussions.

"It wasn't anything outlandish, I'll tell you that," he said. "This was never only about that; they wanted an apology."

Fogelman said he was told the committee discussed the matter in the summer of 2016 on at least two occasions, once in July and again in August. The discussions were held in executive session, not open to the public.

By mid-August in 2016, Fogelman was informed the committee voted not to extend any monetary offer.

He suggested a tight school budget was one concern about authorizing a payment, but he also believed there was another factor.

"I think they were afraid that it would incentivize other people to come forward, like a copycat kind of thing," Fogelman said. "To me, that's ridiculous."

The Eagle filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the release of the minutes from the July 25, 2016, executive session. That request

In a statement to The Eagle, interim Superintendent Robert R. Putnam said the release of the documents was denied because it would require the district to waive its attorney/client privilege.

In that statement, which does not identify St. Hilaire by name, the committee said a lawyer, experienced in handling sexual abuse claims, was brought in to "investigate and evaluate the allegations," and to advise the district.

That investigation included examinations of district records, and, according to the committee, an interview with St. Hilaire was conducted.

Neither Howcroft nor Frank were interviewed as part of that investigation, both men said.

Putnam identified Michael K. Callan as the special counsel brought in by the district to investigate the claims.

Callan is now a judge in Hampden Superior Court. On Aug. 11, a representative of the Trial Court said Callan declined to comment on the matter.

"The committee and the district take allegations of sexual abuse seriously, regardless of when it is alleged to have occurred," the School Committee's statement reads.

It concluded, however, "Because of the threat of suit and the absence of proof that the former employee in fact committed the acts alleged, the committee decided to take no action until a suit had been filed."

The district provided The Eagle with copies of documents from St. Hilaire's employment records, including the acceptance of his intent to retire on Oct. 31, 1976, and a February 1967 performance evaluation.

In that evaluation, signed by then-Principal Wilfred DeBlois, St. Hilaire was described as conscientious, and that he "gets along very well with the students as well as the faculty and is well-liked and respected by all."

"His major fault, if any, is that he is too willing to help everyone," the evaluation stated. "I certainly want him with us next year."

Expression of remorse

Fogelman corresponded with St. Hilaire in February 2016 about the molestation accusations.

In those letters, copies of which were obtained by The Eagle, St. Hilaire apologized for his actions.

In a letter dated Feb. 7, 2016, St. Hilaire said he would be willing to make monthly financial payments to the men. "I will be glad to send you what I owe you or the fellows, what I could each month," he wrote.

In the same letter, St. Hilaire said a "doctor took care" of him and he "will not repeat anymore the same problems."

In a Feb. 10, 2016, letter to St. Hilaire, Fogelman very specifically laid out the accusations against him from both men.

"Just received your letter about these boys," St. Hilaire wrote in a response dated Feb. 15, 2016. "So sorry this happened during my job at the school, went to many doctors for help."

"Also, I lost my job at the school on this matter," he wrote.

"So sorry on this matter, I wish to be dead," he wrote. "Now, I'm really sick about this matter."

"Please let me know [what] will resolve this matter once and for all," he wrote. "So sorry this happen (sic) to them."

Fogelman said a copy of the Feb. 15 letter was among the materials he'd submitted to the School Committee for consideration.

In a January interview at his home with The Eagle, St. Hilaire acknowledged he wrote the letters. There, surrounded by religious art and iconography, he admitted assaulting the boys, and said he was fired as a result.

He said he lost his job when the school received information he'd assaulted a student.

When asked how the school handled the situation, St. Hilaire replied, "They fired me, that's how they handled it."

Officially, St. Hilaire notified the district of his intent to retire on Oct. 24, 1976. That retirement was effective one week later, according to

St. Hilaire insisted the two men who contacted The Eagle were his only victims, and he said it must have been one of them who had reported it to the school.

That is disputed by both men, who said in separate interviews they never divulged the assaults to anyone until well into adulthood and long after St. Hilaire left his job.

Fogelman also is skeptical of St. Hilaire's claim there were only two victims.

"A typical abuser doesn't just stop at one person," he said.

Fogelman said he still has unanswered questions about how much the school knew about St. Hilaire and the students who worked for him.

"How long was this going on for? How did people not know? He was apparently hiring and paying these boys to do tasks for him; was that allowed? Why did he have such easy access to them? Why didn't anyone ask questions?"

"I believe there are dozens of victims at minimum," Frank said, "and I'd bet my next five paychecks on it.

"We've both been pretty patient. We've gone to the police; the police since have declined to act whatsoever," he continued. "We've gone to the school board; they've declined to act whatsoever.

"We kind of feel like we've been hung out to dry. This was a pretty serious, traumatic experience at the hands of the school district and they've ignored us."

Police hands tied

Howcroft said he reported the molestation to the Adams Police Department in 2006, after his visit to the school building. During that visit, he said he encountered a different janitor working there who gave him the impression St. Hilaire was at some point re-hired by the school.

There is no evidence, however, that St. Hilaire was hired back.

In an email from May 1, 2008, Officer Alan Vigiard informed Howcroft the department was unable to bring criminal charges due to the expiration of the statute of limitations, but he said St. Hilaire was contacted by police.

"I apologize that I could not do more for you," Vigiard wrote. "If it's any consolation, St. Hilaire was notified that a complaint of sexual abuse was reported to the police department and that we would be contacting him to discuss the matter in detail. So St. Hilaire is aware that someone still remembers what he did."

In an unrelated matter, Vigiard resigned from the department in November 2009 after being charged with 10 counts of possession of child pornography.

He pleaded guilty to those charges in May 2011 and was sentenced to two years in prison. After his release, Vigiard was again charged with possession of child pornography and pleaded guilty to those charges last December and was sentenced to up to 12 years in prison.

Facebook connection

Howcroft said he and Frank grew up near each other in Adams, though neither was aware the other had been molested until much later in life.

He said the two reconnected after he moved to Australia in 2009 and he spotted Frank's name on Facebook.

After being in communication for some time, Howcroft said he broached the subject with Frank.

"Do you happen to remember a guy named Clement St. Hilaire?" Howcroft asked Frank. "And, he said, 'Oh, yeah, it's one of my darkest memories.'"

Howcroft said he recalls other students' suspicions of St. Hilaire's inappropriate behavior during the era in which he attended Adams Memorial.

"Clem got caught molesting another boy, and that boy turned him in," Howcroft said. "Early on in the eighth grade. And Clem was fired after that."

That would put St. Hilaire's exit sometime in late 1976, and disputes St. Hilaire's claim that the two were his only victims because neither of them reported their own assaults at that point.

Howcroft recalls the details of the molestations less clearly than Frank, but estimates he was assaulted at least a dozen times.

During the summer of 1976, Howcroft said he was also asked by St. Hilaire to assist him, even though school was not in session.

"He'd meet me at the school and the school was empty so it made it very easy for him," he said.

"Basically he'd pull his pants down and I'd have to stroke him and he'd do the same to me while we looked at Playboy magazines in the dark of these custodial closets," which he said were lit only by flashlight.

After St. Hilaire left, Howcroft said, the school made no effort to reach out to the boys he victimized.

"They were very, very well aware that he worked with these students," he said. "The school never mentioned it to us."

"I only found out that he'd been fired because somehow my cousin who went to the same school came to my house after school one day and said, 'Did you hear St. Hilaire was fired for molesting a boy?' I remember my mom was very concerned and she asked me, 'Did he touch you?' and I lied. I said 'No, he didn't.'"

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