

Submitted by Rebecca Skinner in conjunction with Isis Brunet, sisters Jacob Dandens, a victim of clergy abuse.

Jacob's Story

Our brother Jacob was born 09/09/1975 and died 15/01/2007 as a result of an accidental drug overdose.

He was sexually abused during the period of 1985 - 1986 by [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who was hired by Fr Pickering. Fr Pickering at the time was the Catholic Priest at St James Catholic Church, Gardenvale, Victoria.

[REDACTED] worked, and for a period lived, in a bungalow on Church property located next to St James Primary School. [REDACTED] was treated as an honorary member of school staff and played at school rehearsals and events. [REDACTED] was free to take boys for choir practice from nearby St James Primary School during school hours.

It has been acknowledged in The Age that Fr Pickering sexually abused boys in more than one Parish, however nothing has been written about [REDACTED].

Jacob begged not to continue going to choir however Fr Pickering and [REDACTED] told my mother that it was important that he attend [REDACTED] for spiritual and character development. [REDACTED] would sometimes call our house the night before practice to ensure that Jacob would attend.

The years of sexual abuse was not disclosed to anybody explicitly until Jacob was 19.

Jacob confided the abuse to Isis, however did not go into specific details as to the nature of the abuse. We do know he was molested during choir camps run by both men, and also during [REDACTED] practice. Isis noticed he often returned home from choir practice white faced and groggy. I remember him on more than one occasion coming home unusually tired and going straight to bed afterwards.

Jacob later told Isis that alcohol and drugs were given to him, after which he was molested in the showers or toilets. In addition on more than one occasion a drunk [REDACTED] telephoned Jacob at home and masturbated on the phone.

Contacting the Roman Catholic Church

After Jacob's disclosure to the family our mother wanted to pursue the matter through the Catholic Church and was given the name of Sr [REDACTED]. Sr [REDACTED] met with my brother and mother on 16/02/1999 at [REDACTED]

Going back to a Catholic school environment was extremely distressing to my brother. He was deeply uncomfortable about sharing his experiences with a religious person, even more so in a environment to that which his abuser operated in.

Sr [REDACTED] said that she was collating information on abuse for church authorities. She did not discuss what was going to happen with this information going forward – or with whom it would be shared. No follow up contact was made by Sr [REDACTED] or the Church. This made Jacob feel as though the story of his abuse was considered to be not important. He felt violated within the Church environment once again and decided not to ever share his experiences again.

Contacting The Police

After his disclosure Jacob did not want to go to the police, and no one in the family wanted to push him to do so. He was a gentle and fragile person.

Years later in 2007, due to the nature of Jacob's death my mother was required to go to the police and make a statement about my brother. In that statement she wanted it written that it was her opinion that the untimely death of our brother was as a result of the sexual abuse that took place at the Gardenvale Parish. I watched the interview, as I was there for support. My impression was that the policeman was not interested in this information and that he was not going to include the reference to the abuse in her statement that he was documenting. Our mother, not an assertive woman, uncharacteristically insisted that [REDACTED] and Fr Pickering's names were included. My impression was that the policeman added the information reluctantly.

In 2007 Isis independently telephoned the Police hoping that she would be able to make a statement about the abuse. The Police Officer she spoke to discouraged her from pursuing the matter, saying that as she was not the victim should would be unable to make a complaint. When Isis suggested that she could assist Police by identifying his abuser though photographs [REDACTED] [REDACTED] having previously told her the name he went under was not his real identity) the Police Officer refused. The Officer said that because the crime occurred so long ago and because the victim was dead there was no legal avenue to investigate further despite the fact that the abuser may still be in the community and offending today.

Effects of the Abuse on Jacob

- From the age of 9 to 19 Jacob suffered his abuse, and memories of his abuse, on his own, certain that his family would not believe him.
- He battled depression, agoraphobia and anxiety.
- He was an alcoholic, and self medicated through drink and drug use.
- He hated bathing as bathrooms reminded him of the circumstances of the abuse.
- He never had a job, he did not enjoy sex, he did not have a long term partner, he did not go overseas, he did not complete his secondary education. He did not do, or was rendered unable unable to do, many of the things that most people take for granted, things that make life meaningful.

Effects of the Abuse on Jacob's family

- Deep and continuing grief at the untimely death of a son, brother, grandson, uncle, brother-in-law and friend.
- As a family we are distressed that he was not able to engage in or enjoy life as most people do.
- I observed my parent's profound stress of having a son that they did not know how to reach, particularly during his very troubled teen years.
- I believe my parents are still having problems coming to grips with the childhood abuse. It seems to me to be particularly difficult for my mother who remains a devout Catholic.
- Isis and I share a deep distrust of the Catholic Church, especially in light of the lack of legal accountability it enjoys.
- That distrust extends to the Catholic school system, we will never educate our children at a Catholic school.
- In the years following Jacob's death I am often uncomfortable at remembering my childhood, despite the fact that I personally I had a reasonably happy upbringing. It brings back memories of him, and what he must have suffered.
- I worry about what I may feel when my son approaches the age of 9.
- I find it difficult to trust other men when it comes to my son (only) and am always hyper-vigilant when men are in my home, even very dear friends. While I understand my reaction, it distresses me to have these thoughts about men I know to be guiltless, decent people.

- Isis grieves the deep bond of friendship she shared with Jacob, who was only 13 months younger than her. They shared a bedroom, a school and were very attached all their lives. She doesn't remember a family moment without him until his death.
- Jacob's pain is alive in those who loved him to this day.

What Justice Would Look Like To Us

- That the Catholic Church adopts a zero tolerance of Child Abuse.
- That there is increased transparency within the Church.
- That all Religious who have had a charge made against them are immediately suspended from duties that bring them into contact with any children.
- That ALL allegations are immediately forwarded by the Church to the Police.
- That allegations are not handled /disciplined within the Church.
- That Religious are not allowed to move overseas once allegations have been made.
- That a specialized unit of the Police force is created to deal with this issue.
- That personnel / Police within this unit are fully equipped to be able to deal with victims in deep distress.
- That this unit is well advertised so that victims, both primary AND secondary, can access it.
- That the law is changed within Australia so that the Catholic Church is made vicariously responsible for the actions of its priests, nuns, brothers and staff.

In conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to present our brother's story. We will both follow the progress of this important Inquiry with great interest. You have a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of a safer world for our children and our grandchildren.
What task could be more important?