

# SNAP in the Spotlight

by Wayne Laugesen

A lawsuit filed by a former employee contends that the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests is motivated by self-interest and animus to the Church, not the cause of aiding clergy-abuse victims.

ST. LOUIS — In the wake of a lawsuit challenging her organization's integrity, the managing director of the embattled clergy-abuse organization said facts will exonerate her organization. In the meantime, she said, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) will continue "standing up for victims of sexual abuse" and won't be deterred by lawsuits.

The organization's critics are less positive, pointing to growing suspicions SNAP is less in the service of survivor support and more in the business of feeding plaintiffs to lawyers in return for financial kickbacks. "We are not defending the Catholic Church, but it is an incredibly horrendous matter to falsely accuse a priest of sexual abuse," said Chicago attorney Bruce Howard, whose client is suing SNAP.

Longtime Outreach Director Barbara Dorris took over leadership of SNAP Feb. 3, after the Dec. 31 resignation of Executive Director David Clohessy and the Feb. 3 resignation of president and founder Barbara Blaine. The staffing shakeup comes as the organization faces high-profile charges raised in the lawsuit filed Jan. 17 by Howard's client and SNAP's former director of development, Chicago journalist Gretchen Hammond, who is biologically a male and identifies as "transgender."

"The whole thing had become a sham," Hammond told the Register, explaining why she was fired from SNAP and why she filed a lawsuit. Hammond was sexually abused as a child at an elementary school while growing up in England. Hammond had been a fundraiser for 15 years when she took a job at SNAP's Chicago office in 2011. "Fundraisers are idealistic by their very nature," said Hammond, who practices Judaism. "I joined on with SNAP because of my experience with abuse, and I thought this would be a good step, in terms of my idealism and my career. I joined feeling I was helping survivors by raising money for advocacy, prevention and awareness."

Hammond said she became suspicious when she could not obtain sufficient information about outreach services for survivors. Hammond said Blaine told her survivors were cared for in "survivor-outreach meetings," but Hammond was never allowed to attend one. Hammond tells of Blaine traveling internationally and running up big expenses at "lavish hotels throughout Europe" and Australia. "I was raising all this money, so I was concerned about how it was spent," Hammond said. "I raised the money believing it would serve a cause I cared about."

Hammond was denied permission to sit in on a financial audit of SNAP's books, and every time Hammond raised questions, things became increasingly tense. "It was a very secretive environment," Hammond said. "Barbara [Blaine] was rather paranoid the Catholic League or the Catholic hierarchy had bugged the office. She wouldn't even have conversations in her office with the door closed. It was very, very strange." Told to never say or write "attorney" or "lawyer" in the office, Hammond resorted to using the code word "roses" when discussing them in conversations and emails.

## The Lawsuit

Hammond's lawsuit does not mince words, claiming:

- "SNAP's commercial operation is premised upon farming out abuse survivors as clients for attorneys, who then file lawsuits on behalf of the survivors and collect settlement checks from the Catholic Church."
- "In return for client referrals, attorneys reward SNAP with financial kickbacks in the form of donations."
- SNAP "manipulates and exploits media publicity surrounding survivors' lawsuits against the Church to raise its own publicity and drive fundraising efforts."
- "SNAP callously disregards the real interests of victims, using them instead as props and tools as furtherance of their commercial fundraising goals."
- "SNAP did not have a single grief counselor or rape counselor on its payroll."
- "81.5% of SNAP's 2007 donations were donations by attorneys."

According to the lawsuit, "SNAP is a commercial operation motivated by its directors' and officers' personal and ideological animus against the Catholic Church." Among details supporting the "animus" claim is an email Hammond kept, in which Clohessy urges a sexual-abuse survivor to pursue money from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. "Every nickle (sic) they don't have is a nickle (sic) that they can't spend on defense lawyers, PR staff, gay-bashing, women-hating, contraceptive-battling, etc.," Clohessy's email states.

### **SNAP's Response**

None of Hammond's charges are true, Dorris told the Register. "We have never done that, and we will never do that," Dorris said of the litany of complaints in the lawsuit. "I can't imagine how they will prove things that have never happened." Dorris said Hammond was not allowed to attend support-group meetings because they are private. "The fact that she was not allowed to see them testifies to how good we are at what we do," Dorris said. "People feel safe enough to call us because we keep things private."

Hammond said the "privacy" argument makes no sense: "I'm a survivor of sexual abuse," she said. "Yet I can't go to witness even one sexual-abuse support meeting?" As for alleged attorney "kickbacks," Dorris characterizes payments to SNAP by trial lawyers as "donations." "I think 'payment' or 'kickback' is the wrong word," Dorris said. "We take donations from attorneys. We also take donations from cops, doctors, social workers and church employees. We're a not-for-profit, and that's how we survive."

The lawsuit contains documentation of large contributions from attorneys representing clients referred to them by SNAP. "We would get these checks for \$25,000 and \$30,000, and I'd ask 'Where did this come from?' I wanted to know what it was about," Hammond explained to the Register. "I'd ask Barb, and she'd say, 'Don't worry about it. You should just be celebrating.'"

Hammond said her questioning of income and expenditures created such an uptight environment it began to affect her health. She gained weight and suffered depression. In February 2013, she claims, a SNAP volunteer knocked on her door and demanded a flash drive she had taken home from the office. She quickly copied it before handing it over and said the information she saved will prove her claims against SNAP.

Hammond said Clohessy was generous and careless with his email password, sharing it with her and others, and he sometimes asked her to manage his account. "Two days after they came for the flash drive, Barbara [Blaine] called and said, 'How are you?' I said, 'I'm okay.' Then she said, 'You're not happy, and we're not happy. I think we need to end this.' I asked if she was firing me. Or laying me off. She said, 'Good luck' and then hung up the phone," Hammond recalled.

### **Calls for Transparency**

Attorney Martin Nussbaum, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, says the Hammond case raises enough questions that SNAP should be forthcoming with full details about its fundraising and expenses. "Hammond has made some very specific allegations regarding large donations from plaintiffs' law firms that specialize in suing Catholic institutions. The suit alleged quid pro quo between SNAP and these law firms," said Nussbaum, who has represented Catholic institutions in cases involving more than 1,000 sexual-abuse claimants. "SNAP has long called for the Church to be transparent. It is now time for SNAP to be transparent in how it operates and who is funding it."

Jonathan Haden, a Kansas City attorney who represents religious organizations against sexual-abuse claims, said the Hammond case could answer a lot of questions that have been raised about SNAP for years. "I will be particularly interested in what discoverable information is released to the public, so we can try to determine whether this plaintiff's allegations are true," Haden said. "It goes to the legitimacy of SNAP and whether it is an organization that truly represents the interests of survivors or whether it is something else."

Though Hammond worked in Chicago while Dorris worked in St. Louis, SNAP's professional staff is small, and the two often communicated during Hammond's tenure. "I used to confide in her [Dorris] some of my concerns, but I have emails where she was saying bad things about me," Hammond said. "Gretchen and I got along okay," Dorris said. "She did some good things, and she did some things that weren't so good. Eventually, it just wasn't a good fit, and we let her go."

### **Other Legal Actions**

The Hammond lawsuit isn't the first legal action claiming SNAP is financially rewarded for promoting sexual-abuse lawsuits. Dorris, Clohessy and SNAP are defendants in an ongoing defamation case brought by Father Xiu Hui "Joseph" Jiang in U.S. district court in St. Louis. Father Jiang, who escaped religious persecution in China, claims "SNAP, David Clohessy and Barbara Dorris have led a shameless smear campaign ... relentlessly accusing him of molesting" a minor child "with malice and reckless disregard for the actual facts of the case."

In response to allegations SNAP was paid by the plaintiff's lawyers to defame Father Jiang, a judge ordered SNAP last June to turn over information "regarding contributions attorneys at the law firm Chackes, Carlson & Gorovsky made to SNAP from 2005 through 2012." A memorandum and order issued in August by U.S. district Judge Carol Jackson castigated SNAP for disobeying the order and making it impossible for Father Jiang to pursue his defamation case. "The court will direct that it has been established that the SNAP defendants conspired with one another and others to obtain plaintiff's conviction on sexual-abuse charges and that they entered into this conspiracy due to discriminatory animus against plaintiff based on his religion, religious vocation, race and national origin," Jackson wrote.

She continued: "The court will direct that it has been established that the SNAP defendant's public statements about plaintiff were false and that they did not conduct any inquiry into the truth or falsity of these public statements, but instead made these statements negligently and with reckless disregard for the truth." The judge ordered SNAP to pay Father Jiang's legal costs, but overall damages in the defamation case have not been resolved.

None of this fazes Dorris, who says the judge was simply wrong in her ruling. "It's just not true. None of it is true," Dorris said. "We stood up for a victim and the victim's parents in that case. That's what we do."

### **The Catholic League**

But according to Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Hammond's lawsuit validates the Catholic League's long-standing accusation that "SNAP is a fraud." In a Jan. 30 news release, Donohue lists various actions by SNAP and its officials, and by others who have supported the group, which he says indicate the group "is motivated by hate and exploits the very people it claims to serve." Said Donohue, "Justice demands that it be shut down by the authorities before it does any more harm."

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