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‘What, are you on some kind of a crusade?’

Klest estimates he represented 500 victims of sexual abuse during three decades in law

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The attorneys were enjoying beers in the office on a Friday afternoon in 1991 when the phone rang. “Hey, I got this kid on the phone who said he was molested by a priest,” Joseph G. Klest recalls his colleague telling him. “Do you want to take it?”

At the time, Klest was, in his words, a “hand-to-mouth street lawyer” handling minor criminal matters and real estate closings. The “kid” was a 20-year-old with cerebral palsy from DuPage County. Klest invited him to his office for an informal interview.

“Yeah,” Klest remembers thinking after the interview, “there might be something here.”

In December of that year, Klest filed suit in Cook County Circuit Court on behalf of the 20-year-old against the priest in question, Rev. Henry Slade, in addition to the bishop at the Roman Catholic Diocese of Joliet and the diocese as a whole.

Slade pleaded guilty to criminal sexual abuse. Klest and the client settled a civil claim.

That was the first of what Klest estimates has been “well over 500” civil sexual abuse cases.

Since 1985, Klest, 62, has operated the Klest Injury Law Firm out of offices in Chicago and Schaumburg. About 40 percent of his practice is general

injury casework — such as motor vehicle accidents, wrongful death, product liability and nursing home injury.

The other 60 percent are civil sexual abuse cases.

“When you find a niche that nobody else is practicing in, you’ve got to grab it,” Klest said.

“It’s not something I would have chosen. I would much rather be handling car accident cases.”

He’s being facetious though, and soon elaborates.

“I am also proud of the fact that I’ve exposed a lot of wrongdoing,” he said, “that frankly helps protect children from predators.”

While earning his J.D. at The John Marshall Law School, Klest clerked for Sam L. Amirante, the attorney who had just completed his representation of serial killer John Wayne Gacy.

“Victims would go to him very, very broken. The lawyers were the ones who acted as the priests should have acted by giving them support and understanding and acceptance.”

Gacy was sentenced to death in 1980. Klest joined Amirante in 1981.

“There was a status to clerking for somebody like that,” Klest said. “Everybody outside would say, ‘How can you defend (Gacy)?’ And I would come back with, ‘Do you want the cops to



Joseph G. Klest

just decide that you’re guilty and have somebody sentence you to a prison term?” No, you want a trial. It’s the cornerstone of our Constitution.”

His connection to Amirante came from Klest’s brother, who knew Amirante and connected the two. The same kind of right-place-right-time dynamic was at work 10 years later when Klest began his work with sexual abuse victims.

“All of a sudden, I found myself with this huge case in a breaking field,” Klest said about the Slade case. “And because of the press I kept getting calls. It just built bigger and bigger and bigger.”

While working on the Slade case, his research led him to a support group for families whose children had been assaulted by outsiders. There he met several key activists in the fight against child abuse, including retired priest Tom Doyle.

In the 1970s, Doyle served at

Catholic Church regarding sexual abuse of children.

Doyle found a kindred spirit in Klest, whom he calls “one of the pioneers” of clergy abuse cases.

“He was one of the few who had the courage to take on the Catholic Church,” Doyle said. “He always showed himself to be a man of integrity and honor.”

As more and more cases of sexual abuse in the church came to light, victims found support from attorneys, Doyle said.

“The church found out that the American court system was the one playing field where they were up against a power that they could not control,” Doyle said.

About a year and a half after the Slade case, Klest represented the family of a deceased man who was molested by a Kankakee priest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The man committed suicide at the age of 36 following trauma from his assault.

The priest, Myles White, was caught in 1992 when video surfaced of him having sex with a 16-year-old. Other cases came to light after that, including Klest’s client’s.

“I had a judge say to me, ‘What, are you on some kind of a crusade?’” Klest said. “I said, ‘No, this is a problem that’s been swept under the rug and needs the light of day.’”

Klest credits a combination of personal-injury attorneys and the media for shining that light.

“If we can’t file suits, the press won’t print,” Klest said.

“But once a lawsuit is filed, they can always print, ‘A lawsuit is filed that alleges ...’”

Doyle’s fight has cost him the support of the church. He views Klest and other attorneys as doing the work religious leaders should have done.

“Victims would go to him very, very broken,” Doyle said. “The lawyers were the ones who acted as the priests should have acted by giving them support and understanding and acceptance.”

Klest is quick to point out that child molestation and sexual abuse is not a problem of the church. It’s a problem of any group that works with children,

and indeed, Klest has represented victims molested by doctors, Boy Scouts troop leaders, teachers, coaches, business owners, and mentors.

“The percentage of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is precisely the same as in every other type of institution that deals with kids,” Klest said.

“Every institution that deals with kids has this problem.”

Today, Klest has branched out from the law to art. He is co-producing two upcoming documentaries: one on the 1985 Chicago Bears, and another on Amirante’s defense of Gacy, based on the book Amirante co-wrote about the case.

But his largest audience remains the one impacted by his legal work. Klest has about 20 clients right now whose cases are at various stages of negotiation and litigation — including one client who alleges he was molested by defrocked priest Daniel McCormack, who in 2007 pleaded guilty to abusing five

children.

“(Klest) was part of a small group of men and women who have challenged the history of the Catholic Church, that’s for sure,” Doyle said.

“They are not going to get away with this ever again because of men and women like Joe.”