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## The Tragic Fallout of Molestation

By Anne Constable  
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Lonnie Bennett was an all-American boy.

He had everything going for him. Handsome, popular, maybe a little spoiled, he was freshman class president at Robertson High School in Las Vegas, N.M., a football star, a high-scoring basketball player. He won trophies for boxing, track, rodeo events, even disco dancing. In the eighth grade, he got a standing ovation for his performance on the trampoline.

A football injury changed his life. While recovering, he met Sabine Griego, pastor at Our Lady of Sorrows Roman Catholic Church, at the New Mexico Highlands University swimming pool.

Bennett was 13 years old when Griego began sexually abusing him.

"He had me believing it was right in the eyes of God," Bennett said in a court document. The abuse continued into his senior year in high school when the priest brought Bennett to live with him in the rectory at Queen of Heaven Church and plied him with drugs, alcohol and a trip to Mexico, Bennett said.

In 1992, Griego was suspended by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe after allegations of abuse by a number of victims. Bennett filed a complaint against him and the archdiocese in 1994, accusing the priest of rape and sexual and psychological assault. The following year the archdiocese reached a financial settlement with Bennett.

But the money -- the exact amount is confidential -- has not restored Bennett, 39, to the charmed life of his youth.

After years of problems with drugs and alcohol, and a long record of mostly minor criminal offenses, he is in the San Miguel County Detention Center, where he is awaiting a forensic evaluation to determine his competency to stand trial on a charge of aggravated assault.

"It's a huge tragedy," said Merit Bennett, no relation, the Santa Fe attorney who with his partner Stephen Tinkler represented Bennett. "His was one of the more gruesome stories."

For the family, said Bennett's mother, Judy Gallegos, the past 20 years have been "nothing but nightmares."

Griego, she said, "destroyed everything in my life. I feel he robbed me of my son."

No one knows better than Bennett what he has lost.

"I feel like I'm a nobody, and I feel if this would have never happened, right now I would have gone to college and I would have a family and a home and I would be a lot better off, that's for sure. I'd have a job," he told the attorney for the archdiocese in his 1994 deposition.

Last month during an interview in the detention center in Las Vegas, N.M., Bennett again expressed regret for what might have been and his loss of self-esteem. His eyes filling with tears, he said, "If I can't take care of myself, I can't take care of any children."

Hands that heal, hands that hurt

Bennett is one of hundreds of New Mexico children whose lives were irreparably damaged by pedophile priests, some of whom were sent to parishes in the state by bishops aware of their previous offenses.

Although many of them received financial settlements from the church, they are finding it difficult to put their lives back together.

As the Rev. Jim Wolff, a retired priest who still preaches at Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community, said earlier this year, "The church will survive. But a lot of these kids won't."

Whether the abuse occurs within the family, where it is called incest, or within the church, where it is called pedophilia, "The effect of both is totally devastating," Wolff said. "Violence against children, who are defenseless, is such a breach of trust."

Wolff, a licensed psychotherapist who has been listening to abuse victims for 20 years, said, "It's almost insurmountable for them."

Bennett's emotional

roller coaster begins

During an interview last month Bennett describe how his mother, a devout Catholic, gave permission for him to live with Griego in Albuquerque during the first semester of his senior year and to attend Del Norte High School. According to Bennett, he and the priest regularly shared bottles of wine and marijuana. Griego took him and three other boys on a road trip to Mexico where the priest bought gas, paid for meals and purchased drugs for them. In return, Bennett said, they "would have to do what he wanted."

Like most victims, he bore the abuse in silence. In his deposition in 1994 Bennett said, "I never told anybody, just 'till recently. I would never tell anybody. ... My mother didn't even know. I don't even think they suspected it. I've been blocking it out all these years."

After graduation, Bennett went to Hawaii hoping to hook up with his stepbrother, who was selling burial plots. He ended up in a mental hospital after an altercation with police. It was his first stop on a two-decades-long emotional roller coaster.

In his early 20s, he tried to commit suicide by slitting his wrist. As Bennett explained at his deposition, "And just being molested by a priest, not having the self-respect of myself and the respect of others anymore, I just wanted to end my life and I thought that would do it, but I was wrong."

He's tried more than a dozen drug-treatment programs all over the West, always hoping that the latest one will be the cure, the one that will restore him to the physical and mental vigor of his youth.

When he was drinking or using drugs, Bennett got in trouble with the law. Once he busted out the window of a sheriff's department patrol car with his feet. In 1996, he received five years' probation for a felony battery of a police officer.

He is accused now of assaulting a 21-year-old man with a tire iron after a Saturday-night fight over five cigarettes and a small bottle of strawberry schnapps. "People are always trying to jump me around here," Bennett said.

Stress can trigger

bipolar disorder

Besides addictions to drugs and alcohol, Bennett suffers from bipolar disorder, what used to be called manic-depressive disease.

Scientists now think bipolar disorders are genetically inherited. Like a time bomb in the brain, its symptoms can be triggered by stressful life events, such as sexual abuse.

"Bipolar disorder has a pretty heavy genetic component," said Susan Cave, a Santa Fe psychologist who does forensic evaluations of people accused of inappropriate sexual contact with children. "But this is the kind of stress that could precipitate the disorder."

Erik Craig, a licensed psychologist in Santa Fe and a member of the clinical-psychology faculty at the Pacific Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, Calif., agreed.

"Almost unilaterally in my experience of working with bipolars, the first episodes are almost associated with a period of excessive stress which might be moral, socioeconomic or some kind of traumatic sexual stress," Craig said.

Dr. John Evaldson, a Santa Fe psychiatrist, also said that stress "absolutely" can activate illnesses such as

bipolar disorder.

While no one, of course, can say for sure what caused Lonnie Bennett's mental illness, attorney Merit Bennett thinks it was triggered by the sexual abuse.

Bennett, who has practiced personal-injury law for 27 years, said, "I know of no other behavior that causes more damage than childhood sexual abuse. It's probably the worst thing that could happen to a child."

In priest abuse cases, he said, the child unconsciously feels he is being judged by God. The message he gets is, "This is how much you're worth. You're my sexual object."

"This is about as low as it gets," he said.

Recovery is more difficult for post-adolescent teen-agers than for young children, Bennett said. The reason is that the pedophile often uses drugs and alcohol to seduce the youth. Besides the abuse, the victim must also overcome the substance addictions.

Bennett, who with Tinkler handled dozens of priest abuse cases, said, "Our assessment is that Griego's victims were the most damaged of all. He became their best friend. They became dependent on him. When he dumped them -- and moved on to other kids -- they were devastated."

Cave said she knows of no studies on how victims of priest abuse fare in later life. But she did say, "With treatment, people can get symptoms under control. But they never really go away. These people struggle one day at a time."

She added, "What's really important is to break the power of the secret. Once that comes out -- even in private with a psychologist -- there's tremendous relief."

Craig agreed.

"You can't amputate the experience," he emphasized. "The person carries that. What (the victims) can do is learn how to hold it in a different way so it doesn't create disabling patterns in their lives. "

Recovery, he said, also depends on three factors; the severity, length and kind of abuse. When the person also suffers from addictions to drugs and alcohol, "recovery is that much more challenging," but "not hopeless."

'I belong in a treatment program'

Like many people with bipolar disorder, Bennett's life is a self-destructive cycle. When he takes the medication necessary for bipolars to function, he is coherent and law-abiding. But when he stops taking the legal drugs and starts using street drugs and alcohol, his behavior becomes unpredictable.

"Like a typical bipolar, whatever he has is gone. He gets in trouble, then he goes back into treatment. It will be OK for a while, then he goes off again," explained attorney Tinkler. "This is what his mother has lived with since 1982 or 1983."

"He walks around like a hobo. I buy him nice stuff and he gives it away or trades it for a joint," Gallegos said.

In December, she said she was expecting him to meet her at the airport when she returned from a Christmas visit to Nevada. But Bennett never made it to the airport -- and he didn't return home from Albuquerque until March, although Gallegos said she regularly wired him money for a ticket and food. "He was just having a grand old time."

If Bennett's half-sister, Merlinda Gallegos, an executive with a Nevada charitable organization, were not in charge of his estate, she added, "He would be down to zero. He would have given it all away."

After the settlement with the archdiocese, Gallegos said the family used some of the money to buy Bennett a house, so he would always have a place to live, and a truck. But much of the money has been used to pay for treatment programs.

But Gallegos said, "He never gave any of the programs a real chance."

Bennett acknowledges, "I belong in a treatment program," but minutes later he says, "I just need to smoke a

good joint and drink some orange juice. "

Viola Lucero-Luper, Bennett's longtime confidante, said she's adamantly opposed to him going to the state hospital for the forensic evaluation scheduled next month.

"That's not treatment," she said. "It's a holding tank. They'll just put him on medications and, before you know it, Lonnie's going to be rocking back and forth."

Lucero-Luper wants Bennett to go to a drug detox and treatment program in Canada that is affiliated with the Church of Scientology.

"He needs help," she stressed. "Lonnie has been victimized by the priest, then by society and now he's being victimized by his family. In town they accept the priest but not him."

Gallegos said that she recently retained a new lawyer to represent her son, but she hasn't been in a hurry to post bail money for him.

"At least I know you have a roof over your head," she told him on a recent visit.

Nobody knows

what to do with him

"No one hates Lonnie Bennett. Even the people he's lashed out against," Tinkler observed recently.

On the other hand, nobody really knows what to do about him.

For the family, his downfall has been "20 years of heartache," Gallegos said.

She said she's begged Bennett's father, Ron Bennett, who lives in Arizona, to take him in and allow him to start a new life, "But he wants nothing to do with him."

She said she's also encouraged his cousins to take an interest in him, "But they're all burned out. Tired."

So is Gallegos, who once had to get a temporary restraining order to prevent him from dropping by her day-care center to borrow money. "Believe me, I'm tired," she said.

The criminal-justice system is also baffled.

"I've been trying to figure out what to do," said Matt Sandoval, the San Miguel district attorney.

"You don't know what to do with a person like this," confirmed Philip Romero, a magistrate and former San Miguel County Sheriff. "The courts have tried everything."

His deputies transported Bennett to many programs, Romero added, but, "He wouldn't accept the help."

If Bennett's mother is burnt out, he said, the system is, too. "But the question is, do we sit back and wait for him to really screw up?"

"He's a very troubled person," he said. "Something hurt him bad."

Gallegos admitted that she used to be ashamed of her son and that some of the rumors about him have been especially hurtful. But now, she said, she wants people to know what happens to victims and, if anybody asks "I tell them."

But all she can tell him now is, "Keep with your prayers, stay positive. I want you to get well Hito."

No comment

Sabine Griego, who worked briefly as a hospital chaplain and psychologist with the state Corrections Department after he resigned, lives in Las Vegas, N.M. He did not respond to a request for comment.

Archbishop Michael Sheehan, who is credited with settling many priest abuse cases and implementing a zero-tolerance policy, has apologized to all victims, had no further comment.

And Luiz Juarez, who was the district attorney in San Miguel County during this period, said he could not recall receiving requests from Bennett's mother or his attorneys to prosecute Griego or questions about why civil authorities did not follow up on the case.

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