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Years of Sex Abuse Described At Choir School in New Jersey

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In its 65 years, the American Boychoir School has created one of the nation's best-known choirs, with its sweet-voiced students, all fifth graders through eighth graders, invited to sing for presidents and at least one pope.

But in a series of interviews in the last two months, a dozen alumni from the 1960's to the 1980's described a pattern of sex abuse at the nonsectarian boarding school by two longtime choirmasters and by nine other staff members, from a headmaster to teachers' aides to a cook, that they say has resonated through their lives.

The portrait of the American Boychoir School that emerges from a review of court documents and interviews with alumni, former staff members and trustees contains echoes of the problems of sex abuse being disclosed in the Catholic Church. While different in some respects -- there are no questions about the impact of celibacy and an all-male priesthood -- the alumni accounts raise similar issues of settings like boarding schools, in which adults are entrusted with the care of children and violate that trust.

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Though the events at the American Boychoir School happened long ago, alumni who were abused say the effects have echoed through their lives. Many speak of prolonged anguish in working out their sexual identities, and several of the men tried suicide. Extended bouts of drug addiction are not uncommon, and a few say they came home to molest their own siblings.

A review of documents in two lawsuits and interviews with alumni and family members speaking on their behalf suggest that a patron of boys choirs who was a convicted chronic child molester, John B. Shallenberger, played an important role in proposing people for the school to hire.

A choirmaster he recommended, Donald G. Hanson, is being sued by an alumnus, John W. Hardwicke Jr., in a suit filed in January 2001 in New Jersey Superior Court in Mercer County that also names the school as a defendant. Mr. Hardwicke, now 44, contends that Mr. Hanson raped and molested him three to four times a day and that he was molested by other adults at the school as well. Mr. Hanson ran the choir from 1970 to 1982.

At Least 3 Other Suits

The school has been a defendant in at least three other lawsuits in the last 14 years alleging sexual abuse as far back as the 1970's. Two of the suits were settled by the school, one of them for \$850,000. Mr. Hanson and his predecessor as choirmaster resigned after admitting to having molested boys under their supervision, according to documents the school submitted in court cases.

School officials, citing the Hardwicke lawsuit, would not discuss specific allegations, but said they now urged students who suspect abuse to speak up, and provide a help line manned by a psychologist to alumni who were molested. But they say it would be unfair to judge their reactions a generation ago by today's standards. Through his lawyer, Richard Howell, Mr. Hanson declined to comment on the accusations. He has also declined to respond to the Hardwicke lawsuit.

There have been previous incidents of sexual abuse in boarding schools and choirs. In the last decade, a drama director at Phillips Exeter Academy was caught secretly videotaping students naked, and was convicted of transporting child pornography across state lines. At another boarding school, Porter-Gaud near Charleston, S.C., alumni accused school officials of sexual abuse and a jury awarded \$105 million in damages.

At the San Francisco Boy's Chorus, the board publicly apologized to Ross Cheit, a law professor at Brown University, who as a boy was molested by an administrator at the chorus' summer camp. But the scope of the abuse that took place at the American Boychoir School seems striking.

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