

Ceremony Honors Victims of Clergy Abuse

Almost 25 Years After Initial Closing, St. Anthony's Seminary Holds Solidarity Project Event by Nikki Chan, Independent Staff

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Alumni from St. Anthony's Seminary gathered last weekend, July 7 through 10, for a reunion that was highlighted by the dedication of the Solidarity Project the afternoon of July 9. The Solidarity Project honors and acknowledges victims of clergy abuse.

Paul Fericano, executive director of SafeNet — Survivors Alliance and Franciscan Exchange Network — led the Saturday afternoon ceremony with a positive spirit and referred to the plaque as a “personal triumph and a triumph for everyone that’s here today.”

SafeNet, together with community members, started the Solidarity Project in 2005 in order to create a “quiet place,” or “grounds of reflection, to acknowledge all who had been hurt,” explained Fericano.

The project consists of two plaques — a rock, which was dedicated July 9, and an athletic bench, built in the 1950s by and dedicated July 18, 2009, to Franciscan Brother Clem Wehe, the former handyman of St. Anthony's Seminary and friend to many students. Both plaques — located under trees in the grassy area behind the Mission Renewal Center and adjacent to the seminary's former campus — are “powerful symbols of unity” and healing for the St. Anthony's Seminary community, Fericano said.

Kathleen Strittmatter, a founding member of the Voice of the Faithful local chapter, described Wehe as “the epitome of goodness.”

Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) — founded in Boston in January 2002 and established locally in November of the same year — aims to support survivors of sexual abuse by providing a space for individuals to voice their pain, including through open mike sessions. In these sessions, Strittmatter recalled, she heard “so much anger and so much hurt.” Of the plaques, Strittmatter said “It’s important to have a place that we know is here.”

Fericano started off the ceremony by acknowledging former seminarians who couldn't make the event, some due to travel reasons, and others who still have a hard time stepping foot on church grounds and are "suffering in silence."

"The dedication represents the first physical space to honor everyone who has felt the impact and to acknowledge the pain," Fericano said.

Approximately 20 people attended the ceremony, including a mix of alumni and their families, as well as members integral to the completion of the Solidarity Project.

Angelica Jochim, a consultant and advocate who works with Franciscan abuse victims, described the plaque as "monumental" for acting as a "call to us to come to an aspiration of union."

"This is a hugely significant moment to invite everyone who has been hurt to reflect and contemplate solidarity and to honor hope of feeling and moving forward," Jochim said.

The plaques further symbolize the commitment to healing and to creating a sense of solidarity and unity, Fericano said. Attendees of the ceremony were encouraged to place stones on the rock to commemorate individuals who have been abused.

Fericano became emotional upon reading the text for the plaque on the rock. "From 1896 until 1987, Saint Anthony's Seminary, located next door, nurtured and prepared hundreds of boys for the priesthood," reads the plaque. "There was great joy on this campus as well as great sorrow. With this dedication we celebrate the good and acknowledge the pain of those who were abused there — a pain shared by their families, schoolmates, the friars, and the community. This bench and stone are symbols of our commitment to the healing process and our will to reconcile our past with hope for the future. We embrace and honor all our memories."

Clement Krause, an alumnus from the class of 1953 and member of the Solidarity Project's steering committee, attended St. Anthony's Seminary during "happier times" and called Fericano "an inspiration."

Fericano and fellow St. Anthony's Seminary alumnus and clergy sexual abuse survivor John McCord founded SafeNet in March 2003. SafeNet is dedicated to peace and the healing of clergy sexual abuse victims.

Saint Anthony's Seminary closed in 1987 and was sold in 2005. It reopened that same year as the Garden Street campus of San Roque High School.

Outreach coordinator Jochim encourages victims of clergy abuse to come forward by calling the confidential phone line for victims of Franciscan abuse at (800) 770-8013.