

After reading the recent news regarding Father Tom Andert, we feel compelled to speak out regarding our family's own history with Father Andert and the leadership at Saint John's Abbey. We feel a responsibility to raise awareness particularly within the Saint John's community, regarding the very real effects of sexual and psychological abuse which is all the more devastating when the community remains silent.

Our family's silence has come at a cost. Just eight months ago to the day, our family suffered the loss of our son Ben to suicide. Ben was a victim of sexual and psychological abuse by Father Tom Andert in the mid-1990's while Ben was a minor student and Father Andert was the headmaster at Saint John's Prep School. Ben brought the abuse allegations to Abbot Timothy Kelly while he was still a student at SJP. Abbot Kelly advised Ben to stay away from Father Andert.

We also had a meeting with Abbot Kelly, as did other personal and professional advocates who presented Ben's case. None of these reports resulted in any action. The official response from the abbey was that a formal investigation was conducted and no cause for action was found. None of the reporting individuals, however, were ever contacted to validate or challenge the accusations. (We knew that our concerns had fallen on deaf ears when after the interview Abbot Kelly patted Margaret on the head and told her that it was common for mothers to overreact in this situation. How many other mothers had he encountered?)

In 2002, Abbot John Klassen agreed to pay for Ben's counseling. Abbot Klassen was fully aware that Ben was having issues precipitated by his experiences with Father Tom Andert. The abbey's cover-up of his own abuse weighed heavily on Ben.

Contrary to counsel from his parents in 2007 and advice from his professional and personal advocates, Ben chose not to pursue legal recourse. Why did Ben choose not to litigate? His reasons are probably very comparable to the individual whose allegations were brought forward earlier this week. Many other victims of abuse at Saint John's also have shown this same profile.

Ben chose not to go public with his Saint John's experience because of his concern for the other people in his life. He sought to shield others from humiliation. Ben was particularly concerned about his grandfather (who had been the food service director of the Saint John's community for twenty years), his father (who was an eight year alumnus and former predivinity student in high school), and his uncles and cousins who were alumni of SJP, SJU, or the School of Theology. Ben knew that his entire extended family was very close to many of the Saint John's priests, administrators, coaches, students and employees. Saint John's was part of Ben's familial, social, economic, academic and religious profile--a profile he shares with other victims of abuse at Saint John's.

Ben was caught in the contradiction of a grossly inappropriate relationship in the midst of a highly principled, spiritual, and intellectual environment. Father Andert's sexual and psychological abuse was not consistent with the principles of the Catholic faith and the Benedictine Rule. The abbey's cover-up of the abuse by Father Andert was an equally egregious breach of responsibility and principle. Not the least of these conflicts was Ben's own sexuality in which his abuser assumed the lead in developing. Father Andert spent considerable time convincing Ben of his own homosexuality. Ben was painfully challenged while being groomed by his headmaster until the day of his passing. We are certain

that Fr. Tom Andert abused his authority and responsibility as a headmaster, priest and family friend. This abuse led to Ben's first suicide attempt in 1994 while still a student at SJP. This was the beginning of a life long battle with depression and anxiety that ultimately ended in Ben's suicide in December of 2014.

Father Andert inserted himself into our son's life, usurped and challenged our parental role, and acted recklessly and irresponsibly. Father Andert changed Ben's grades, pulled him from class, served him alcohol, kissed, touched, caressed and exposed himself to our son.

Are some of these actions and behaviors illegal and subject to prosecution? Probably. Are all of these behaviors contrary to a headmaster's charge? Absolutely. Are any of these behaviors worthy of a leader of our Saint John's community?

We know that our son was not alone. We know that there are other unnamed perpetrators, and we believe that Father Tom Andert isolated, groomed, seduced and abused other vulnerable young people. Ben supported efforts to change what he called "a horrible culture of hypocrisy" at St. Johns. It is this culture of silence, shame and secrecy that has caused so much damage. Will you demand accountability and action so that the victims can come forward without guilt and the cycle of abuse can finally be broken?

We plead with the entire community, from the abbot, down through the monastery, the university, and the prep school, with all of its monks, faculty, staff, alumni, and students, to support the victims and stand up to the indifference that has allowed the situation to perpetuate for decades. We need to collectively and communally demand accountability and action in order to restore the lost integrity.

Every day since December 19th we have cried for the loss of Ben who was a precious gift from God. Every day we pray that Ben rests in peace with his Savior. Every day we pray that our family's experience does not have to be endured by others. And every day we pray that the cycle of abuse and silence at Saint John's will be broken and be replaced by healing.

Sincerely,



Eric C. Spanier

Very proud father of Ben
Not so proud 1964 graduate of SJP
Not so proud 1968 graduate of SJU
Still a devout and faithful Catholic



Margaret Ann Spanier

Very proud mother of Ben
Still a devout and faithful Catholic

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