

SPOKANE

Former Scout sues for molestation

By Dan Hansen
Staff writer
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A man who was a Boy Scout in the early 1960s is suing the national organization and its Inland Northwest Council, saying leaders should have taken steps to prevent his being molested by a scoutmaster.

Len Zickler, who now lives in Federal Way, Wash., was a Scout for two years starting about 1962, in a troop that met at Spokane's Hamilton Elementary School.

The lawsuit contends that assistant Scoutmaster William Cormana "enticed, induced, directed and coerced (Zickler) to engage in deviant sexual acts with him over a several month period."

Cormana, who died March 1 of this year, later was told to quietly leave scouting because of allegations from other boys, said Zickler's attorney, Tim Kosnoff. That could not be independently confirmed.

Zickler, 57, is a Rogers High School graduate who became a city planner and landscape designer. Before moving to Western Washington in 1990, he helped design the Centennial Trail and drew up neighborhood plans for Spokane's Logan, Hillyard and Peaceful Valley neighborhoods, among others.

He said he's coming forward – and speaking out publicly – to encourage others and show the extent of the problem of child sexual abuse, and because he's planning on retiring soon to Spokane, where four of his children live. The family likes to vacation at Diamond Lake, where he says he was abused by Cormana during scouting trips to Camp Cowles.

"It's taken a lot of years for me to actually deal with this in a public sort of way," said Zickler, who recently told his wife and family the secret he says he kept to himself for more than four decades.

"I want to be able to go to Diamond Lake and know that I've dealt with it."

The lawsuit filed Tuesday in Spokane County Superior Court contends that the scouting council – known as the Inland Empire Council until the mid-1990s – was negligent because it allowed Cormana "to routinely segregate Len Zickler off alone for hours without explanation" during the Diamond Lake outings.

It alleges that Scout leaders ignored warning signs that Cormana was abusive. It says the organization should be held accountable for not conducting criminal background checks of leaders and that it should have had a "two-adult rule" to prevent potentially abusive men from being alone with boys.

Tim McCandless, Scout executive for the Inland Northwest Council, said he didn't know about this week's lawsuit until contacted Thursday by a reporter. McCandless said he was unfamiliar with the case, Zickler or Cormana.

Scouting policies have changed significantly since the 1960s, McCandless noted. The organization in the 1980s adopted a "two-deep leadership policy" that prohibits one-on-one contact between Scouts and adult leaders. Every volunteer is put through a national background check, something McCandless doubts would have been possible or practical before the age of computerized record-keeping.

"If they give us any red flags, we tell the applicant thanks but no thanks," McCandless said.

Kosnoff said his Seattle firm has represented "a couple dozen" men who are suing the Boy Scouts of America and local scouting councils for decades-old abuse cases, including some in Seattle, Tacoma and Boise. He also has represented men suing Spokane's Morning Star Boys Ranch for abuse they say they suffered as residents there.

One of his Seattle cases led to a state Supreme Court decision forcing the Boy Scouts to release its "ineligible volunteer files" of volunteers and staff who have been told to leave the organization since the 1940s. Kosnoff said Cormana's name is on that list.

"I can confirm that records I've reviewed show that he was later removed from scouting for childhood sexual abuse," though he was never charged with a crime, Kosnoff said.

Zickler said that around the same time he was being sexually abused, he was approached by another Scout who confided that Cormana was doing the same things to him.

"What he described was exactly what I experienced," he said.

Zickler said he and his wife have a "blended" family with nine children, and that most of them were involved in Scouts "to some extent."

"My wife was probably the first female scoutmaster in Spokane," said Zickler, who also was a volunteer. Working at a Tacoma company that sponsors Scout troops, he now attends fund-raisers and other events for the organization.

"There are obviously some very positive things that come out of scouting," he said.

But he remains cautious.

"One of the main reasons I was involved in scouting (when his children were active) was I wanted to make sure this didn't happen to anyone else."