

Trial lawyer Tim Kosnoff seeking local survivors of mission schools

By JOHN MCGILL

Glacier Reporter Editor

Having represented sexual abuse survivors for a decade, trial lawyer Tim Kosnoff has many settlements in his favor. Working for survivors of Catholic mission schools in Montana, Kosnoff has already won a \$150 million settlement against the Society of Jesus and its treatment of between 80 and 90 Native Americans in the western part of the state, mostly Salish and Kootenai.

Working against bankruptcy deadlines, Kosnoff had only a short opportunity to visit Blackfeet country, but he's returned, searching for survivors of the Cut Bank Boarding Dorm (now the Blackfeet Boarding Dormitory) and the Holy Family Mission.

"At the Diocese of Helena, the Bishop oversaw the Jesuits at the mission schools, and in the case of these generally remote schools they just turned into toxic waste dumps for bad apples," Kosnoff said, "of-ten

with multiple problems in the same mission."

Kosnoff says he's already filed cases on behalf of around 200 sur-vivors against the Diocese of Helena, the Diocese of Great Falls and the Ursuline Nuns who ran the schools and dorms at St. Ignatius. In the case of the nuns, based on interviews with his clients Kosnoff believes that the nuns at least took no action to protect the children in their charge and may even have "served them up" to the priests.

Kosnoff says the legal situation at the Helena Diocese is unique since there are so many survivors, each able to claim a substantial settlement if the court finds in their favor. The Diocese doesn't want the stigma of going through bankruptcy, he said, and the amount that would be collected would hardly cover all the claimants. So, instead, Kosnoff is "looking for a third way to use their considerable insurance coverage to resolve the cases and put them behind them."

As a result the Diocese and the attorneys are interviewing clients in a straightforward, simple way,

to find out what happened. "They are non-litigated, informal interviews," Kosnoff said, "and it's ironic that we have a shared interest with wanting people to come forward and Helena wanting to get them all paid with no problems coming up later."

The plan, he said, is to go through "global mediation," where all the defendants get together for a global settlement, but the window for sur-vivors to be included closes this November. "After November, sur-vivors will probably not be able to collect since the Diocese will have exhausted its funds and limited assets, so people who don't come forward now will probably face an insolvent defendant and probably not be able to collect anything because the Diocese will have no in-surance coverage."

While Kosnoff has alerted KBWG FM Thunder Radio and run public service announcements, he believes his message about survivors got confused. The situation in Blackfeet country differs from that found at St. Ignatius, he said, because the abuse was most frequently done, not by clergy, but by both male and

female matrons. “It was clear abuse, at least going into the 70s and 80s, and it’s a significant problem,” Kosnoff said.

their website at www.abusedinmontana.com or email them at gethelp@abusedinmontana.com.

The attorney notes that the small communities found in Indian coun-try sometimes makes it difficult for survivors to come forward with their stories out of a sense of shame and guilt, and sometimes relatives wonder about the cause of their behavior until they learn about the abuse they suffered as children.

“We’re looking at a variety of angles to determine who’s respon-sible,” Kosnoff said, “and there could be multiple culpable entities, but the one that stands out huge, that’s never been tagged is the Bu-reau of Indian Affairs and the De-partment of the Interior.”

But for now, finding survivors of this dark period of history is the number one job for Tim Kosnoff. “It wasn’t your fault – you were a child – and most importantly, if you don’t talk about it, how are children today to be protected? Victims must speak out because they know what happened.”

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