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LOCAL NEWS

DIocese OF SAN ANGELO REACHES OUT OF COURT SETTLEMENT IN CHILD ABUSE LAWSUIT

By Michael Kelly

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — An out-of-court settlement has been reached in the case of an unnamed plaintiff who sued the Diocese of San Angelo, alleging he had been sexually assaulted by a priest over a number of years.

The priest, Father David Espitia, hanged himself June 13, 2003, in Colorado City after the allegations of abuse became known to the diocese.

The plaintiff said the abuse had occurred regularly over an eight-year period up to 2002 while Espitia was a priest in the San Angelo diocese.

The lawsuit sought "punitive and exemplary" damages from the priest's estate and the diocese, alleging that the diocese and Bishop Michael Pfeifer had known Espitia was a danger to children and done nothing to prevent the abuse, alluding to previously established examples of child abuse among priests in the diocese.

"This common plan and scheme, which was in existence well before the abuse of Plaintiff, was followed by the Bishop of the San Angelo Diocese to conceal the crimes against children by Father Espitia and other priests," the lawsuit said.

Documents filed with the case indicated law enforcement authorities had found child pornography on Espitia's computer after his death.

"Complaints to Bishop Pfeifer regarding Espitia's behavior and activities were received from parishioners as early as 1995 and again in 2001 but Espitia was never evaluated, sent for treatment, or disciplined in any way," the plaintiff's lawyers said in a news release Friday.

At the time the lawsuit was filed in December 2009, the bishop denied the allegations. Pfeifer said Espitia told him on June 6, 2003, that he had been accused of sexual abuse of a minor child.

"He totally denied these accusations," Pfeifer said in a written statement dated Dec. 29, 2009.

"Furthermore no accusations of this nature were ever brought to our attention by any other source."

"These are the same old allegations that were made some six years ago and were strongly denied by the Diocese of San Angelo in a public statement to the media," Pfeifer's 2009 statement said.

The bishop could not be contacted for comment late Monday for this story.

Tahira Khan Merritt, the Dallas lawyer representing the plaintiff, said the amount of the settlement was confidential but her client considered it satisfactory.

"The plaintiff is finally able to get closure on this matter. He asserted his rights by filing the case, and this is going to be a long journey for him, with a lot of therapy and a lot of help," she said. "Like the Penn State case, a lot of healing comes with the exposure."

A trial had been scheduled Jan. 17 in the 340th District Court in San Angelo.

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