



## Play Explores Pain of Hiding Clergy Sex Abuse

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For 20 years, Joe Capozzi kept a dark secret about his parish priest.

Capozzi, a Ridgefield native, said Monsignor Peter Cheplic molested him multiple times as a teenager and young adult.

"You say to yourself, 'I can handle it, it's not a big deal,' " said Capozzi, now a 38-year-old resident of Manhattan and a professional actor.

But the self-imposed silence poisoned his relationships and filled him with self-loathing.

Now, several years after he and two other North Jersey men broke their silence and accused Cheplic of abuse, Capozzi has written a play that explores how his secretiveness exerted a paralyzing pall over his life.



Joe Capozzi says the theme of his play, "For Pete's Sake," is "trying to come clean about the secret you keep."

Photo by CARMINE GALASSO

On Saturday, he and a group of fellow actors will perform a staged reading of the one-hour, one-act play — "For Pete's Sake" — at the Kraine Theater in Manhattan.

The play, Capozzi said, is a factual account of the abusive relationship with Cheplic but doesn't assign full names to the characters.

Cheplic, who has long denied the accusations, retired in 2006 after a church investigatory panel began probing the matter. He could not be reached for comment.

The play opens just after Capozzi reported the abuse, in 2005, and a day before newspapers carried the story. It then journeys back into the key moments of his life.

"The theme is trying to come clean about the secret you keep," Capozzi said in a recent interview. "It's trying to understand that the little secret you think you can handle creeps into every different part of your life."

Indeed, he said his pent-up anguish contributed to his divorce and to an earlier broken engagement.

"I have not had one honest relationship with a woman in my life," he said. "It's impossible to have a true relationship when you're lying about this important thing."

Capozzi is financing the production himself and using his actor friends in the cast. He said he hopes the play attracts the attention of a professional producer, but stressed that the chief reason for writing the play was to promote emotional healing and to raise awareness.

"I had so many memories in my head that I needed to get on paper," he said. "I wanted to give people an understanding of what I was dealing with and why I wasn't able to speak up earlier and tell the truth."

The proceeds from a suggested \$10 donation will benefit Road to Recovery, an organization that counsels victims of clergy sex abuse.

Capozzi grew up in Ridgefield, attending St. Matthew's Church, where Cheplic served from 1972 to 1985.

Cheplic became a friend of Capozzi's devoutly Catholic parents, visiting for family dinners and officiating at their religious milestones. He even officiated at Capozzi's wedding.

"My parents are two of the most open, loving people that you will ever meet," Capozzi said. "To have a priest as a family friend was a big deal. He was always at our family functions. He got to know all my cousins."

Cheplic lavished attention on Capozzi, letting him sleep at the rectory and taking him on vacations, including one to Australia, Capozzi said.

The abuse started after Cheplic left St. Matthew's for churches in Hudson and Essex counties, Capozzi said. He added that physical contact occurred when he was 16, with more explicit sexual touching after he turned 18.

"He would ask me personal questions," Capozzi said. "He would try to go down that road, asking me about masturbation and having sex with my girlfriends."

He said the priest would sometimes ply him with alcohol or an over-the-counter drug used to cure motion sickness.

By the time Capozzi entered college, he had become something of a lost soul — distrustful, pessimistic and dark.

"I hated myself for so long," Capozzi said. "I had such disgust for myself that I would go along with it. I hated myself more than him."

Cheplic was never charged with a crime by law enforcement officials because the accusations were too old once they had surfaced in 2005. Cheplic's retirement effectively ended the review by church officials without a finding. Nevertheless, Cheplic is prohibited from publicly representing himself as a priest, the Newark Archdiocese has said.

The archdiocese paid cash settlements to the accusers, including \$50,000 to Capozzi.

Capozzi said he broke his silence for two reasons. He said he was worried that a young family friend was at risk from Cheplic.

"I saw the same relationship starting again," he said. "It was like looking into a mirror."

But he also said his silence had become a psychological burden.

"I felt like I was either going to end it all, or come clean with the truth," he said.