

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

PRICE: 75 CENTS • FRIDAY, JUNE 15, 2012 • OCREGISTER.COM

Central County

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

FRIDAY, JUNE 15, 2012

Local 4

Ex-priest faces sex-abuse charges

Civil case against Michael Harris, once principal of Mater Dei, Santa Margarita Catholic schools, starts Monday.

A sex-abuse and cover-up lawsuit against former Monsignor Michael Harris, a once-popular and high-profile figure who left the priesthood when Orange County's clergy scandal erupted a decade ago, is set to go to trial



GREG HARDESTY
REGISTER
WRITER

Monday in Superior Court.

The plaintiff accuses Harris, former principal of Mater Dei and Santa Margarita Catholic high schools, of sexually abusing him in late 1986 or early 1987 at Mater Dei. The high school in Santa Ana and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange also are named as defendants in the lawsuit.

Although Harris has denied molesting minors and never has been charged criminally, he was part of a landmark \$5.2 million settlement in 2001 that the Los Angeles and Orange dioceses made with his accuser, former Santa Margarita Catholic High School student Ryan DiMaria.

In 2005, nine accusers of Harris settled lawsuits with the Diocese of Orange, and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles listed 12 accusers of Harris in a 2004 report on clergy sexual abuse.

The latest legal action against Harris, whose good looks and charisma once earned him the nickname "Father Hollywood," was filed by a 41-year-old man with a decorated career as a combat pilot in the Air Force, according to court documents.

Peter Callahan, an attorney representing Harris and the other defendants, was not immediately available for comment.

According to the lawsuit, Harris is alleged to have abused John Doe after the then-teenager became something of a hero at Mater Dei. The teen witnessed a purse-snatching outside a grocery store while a soph-



FILE PHOTO: KEN STEINHARDT, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Mater Dei seniors line up at UC Irvine's Bren Center last month. Michael Harris was once principal at Mater Dei. His accuser in a civil case was a student at the school.



FILE PHOTO: MARK RIGHTMIRE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Santa Margarita Catholic High School soon-to-be graduates adjust their caps prior to the graduation ceremony in 2011. Harris was founding principal at the school, which opened in 1987.

omore in 1986, chased down the assailant, subdued him and retrieved the victim's purse.

The would-be purse-snatching victim, in a letter to Harris, called the teenager "a young man of good character and upbringing," and urged Harris to recognize the student with a citizenship award, documents show.

Harris called the boy into his principal's office to con-

gratulate him and give him a rosary blessed by the pope and another small gift and "(assure) him of how proud we are of him and his fine behavior," according to court documents.

Called out of class, the plaintiff was "glowing" and "on top of the world" because he was going to meet with Harris, according to court documents.

During their private, one-hour meeting, however,

Harris is alleged to have grabbed the boy's penis and orally copulated him, according to the lawsuit.

The civil action alleges that church and school officials had prior knowledge of sex-abuse allegations lodged against Harris and were aware of "movie nights" Harris hosted for kids at his rectory, and also alleges that they failed to warn students and parents about the accusations and

his behavior, which included a propensity for giving "bear hugs" to children.

"We look forward to a long-overdue public disclosure at trial of the full extent of sexual abuse perpetrated by Father Harris and the cover-up/mishandling by the Diocese of Orange," said Vince Finaldi, an attorney for the plaintiff.

The man who brought the abuse allegations entered the military six months after graduating from high school in 1989 at age 19. He remains on active duty as a lieutenant colonel and KC-10 pilot who has flown combat missions over Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East and Europe, according to court documents.

The plaintiff first began to "mentally process his sexual abuse" in early 2008 and connect it to emotional issues he was experiencing that included anger, issues with control, authority and power, according to the lawsuit.

After serving as princi-



The former monsignor's good looks and charisma once earned him the nickname "Father Hollywood."

pal at Mater Dei, Harris was handpicked by Orange County church leaders to become founding principal of Santa Margarita Catholic High School, which opened in 1987. Harris is credited with helping to raise nearly \$26 million to get the campus in Rancho Santa Margarita built.

In 1994, Harris, citing stress, stepped down as principal of Santa Margarita High School. The Orange County Diocese placed him on administrative leave that year and prohibited him from working as a priest.

Also that year, a psychological report prepared by doctors at the Saint Luke Institute, a church-run facility for troubled clerics, concluded that there was substance to allegations from several of Harris' accusers. Psychiatrists at Saint Luke also determined that Harris was sexually attracted to adolescent boys, records show.

After leaving the priesthood, Harris, now 65, earned a doctorate degree and launched a successful career building low-income housing.

The civil lawsuit is scheduled to go to trial before Orange County Superior Court Judge Ronald L. Bauer.

CONTACT THE WRITER:
714-704-3764 or
ghardesty@ocregister.com