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College with ties to Community of Jesus under investigation

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ORLEANS - A recently closed Christian college in Canada that had links at one time to the Community of Jesus is the subject of a criminal investigation by Canadian authorities.

Allegations of abuse at the school were first reported by the Toronto newspaper Globe and Mail.

Investigators with the Ontario Provincial Police are asking former students who attended Grenville Christian College in Brockville, Ontario, to contact them with any information, and if they witnessed or were the victims of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse at the college.

According to the Globe and Mail reports, Grenville Christian College became a satellite of the Orleans-based Community of Jesus in 1973 and most of the staff at the college were avowed members of the Community.

Additionally, newspaper reports stated the Anglican Diocese of Ontario recently launched its own internal investigation into the conduct of two Anglican priests, the Rev. Charles Farnsworth and the Rev. Gordon Mintz, who were on the staff. The Grenville school was not under the authority of the Anglican Church, and ran independently.

Grenville Christian College closed in July, citing declining enrollment and increasing operating costs.

Jeffrey Robbins, an attorney who represents the Community of Jesus, said there was a relationship that “evolved” between the school and the original founders of the Community during the 1970s and 1980s and members of the Community did travel to Grenville for retreats. He added, “No doubt there were people in Grenville who are admirers of the Community.”

The Community of Jesus was founded by Cay Andersen and Judy Sorensen in the 1950s as an ecumenical Christian group. Clergy and members follow a community life similar to that of the Benedictine monastic tradition. In addition to families and single people, the Community is also home to sisters and monks who have taken vows of poverty and celibacy. Families live in privately owned homes within the neighborhood.

The most visible feature of the Community is the Church of the Transfiguration that overlooks Rock Harbor. Robbins said about a dozen students every year went to Grenville due to its excellent academic reputation, and students from the Community also attend local Cape schools such as Nauset.

As for the relationship between the Community and Grenville, Robbins said contact gradually lessened since the '70s and it has been more than 15 years since any student attended the school.


“Unfortunately, the best schools all over the country have been the subject of allegations of misconduct,” said Robbins. “The kind of conduct that has been alleged at Grenville, would, if true, be disgraceful conduct and not commensurate with the values of the Community of Jesus.”

At a ceremony Saturday in Brockville, Ontario, marking the closure of Grenville, the Globe and Mail reported that former staff member Ken MacNeil said, "If we contributed to your hurt, we are sorry."

Postings by former students and former members of the Community of Jesus on the online message board www.factnet.org describe being sent to the school and having witnessed or experienced abuse from the staff.

While a majority of postings, many anonymous, on the message board recounted experiences of abuse at the school, other postings recalled positive experiences without witnessing any kind of abuse.

Sgt. Kristine Rae of the Ontario Provincial Police said the investigation started last week and that it will take time to evolve.

"We do have people calling us to share information," said Rae, and the calls have come from "all locales" from possible witnesses and victims of abuse. She asked that anyone with information call  613-925-4221 or e-mail her at kristine.rae@ontario.ca

When asked if Ontario police detectives would come to the United States, Rae said it was not uncommon for officers to travel and work with local police departments as part of an investigation.

Barnstable County Assistant District Attorney Michael Trudeau said it would be "inappropriate" for him to comment on another agency's investigation, but said, "We have had no contact from folks in Ontario regarding this investigation."

As for the allegations about Grenville, Robbins said the Community of Jesus has not been contacted by anyone involved in the Ontario Provincial Police investigation, which, he emphasized, is only looking into allegations of abuse at Grenville.

"Every allegation should be investigated and not treated lightly," said Robbins, and the Community encourages anyone with information about the allegations at Grenville to contact the authorities.

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