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Kathy Shaw, Watchdog on Clergy Sexual Abuse, Dies at 72

By **Sam Roberts**

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Kathy Shaw, a journalist who doggedly investigated allegations of sexual abuse by clergymen and compiled a national register of misconduct accusations so that the public could grasp the dimensions of the crisis, died on Sunday in a hospital in Worcester, Mass. She was 72.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, her niece Renee Whitenett said.

By surveying thousands of cases and posting them on a blog called Abuse Tracker, Ms. Shaw played a meaningful if largely unheralded role in helping fellow journalists and victims of abuse.

“She connected people who were suffering in isolation and blaming themselves and assuming they were the only ones,” David Clohessy, former national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said in a telephone interview. “She helped them understand that, in fact, they were part of a system of corruption that could only really be addressed with a personal response like disclosure, therapy and calling the police, and a collective response like pushing for broad change.”

As a religion reporter for The Telegram & Gazette of Worcester, Ms. Shaw was credited in 2003 with bringing into view a confidential 1962 Vatican document that mandated complete secrecy by church leaders in dealing with cases of sexual abuse by priests and bishops.

Advocates for victims of abuse said that the edict had shielded clergy members from prosecution and contributed to cover-ups.

A number of canon lawyers pointed out, though, that the edict’s provisions had been revised in 2001 and that the Vatican document would not in any case have prevented a bishop from referring crimes by priests to the civil authorities.

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Ms. Shaw and another reporter, George Griffin, tracked down a local priest who had fled to Canada in the late 1970s after the Worcester police issued a warrant accusing him of molesting boys at a youth home he operated.

The priest was extradited and convicted in 1995 of sexually abusing a teenage boy. The conviction was later overturned on the grounds of defects in the jury deliberations and improprieties by the prosecutor in his closing argument.

The Abuse Tracker (originally the Clergy Abuse Tracker) was the inspiration of Bill Mitchell of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a nonprofit research organization in St. Petersburg, Fla. It was started not long after The Boston Globe published a series of articles in 2002 by its Spotlight investigative team revealing that the Archdiocese of Boston had covered up sexual abuse by priests. Mr. Mitchell enlisted Ms. Shaw to help.

“If journalism is the first draft of history,” Mr. Mitchell said in an email, “Kathy Shaw spent more than 15 years compiling the essential index of one of church history’s most important and painful chapters: sexual abuse by clergy and the cover-up by many of their bosses — the bishops and cardinals who valued the church’s reputation above the well-being of victims and survivors.”

After a year at Poynter, Abuse Tracker continued for a time under the auspices of the independent newspaper The National Catholic Reporter.

“It gives a different dimension to the issue because we can clearly see the issue of clergy abuse is affecting the entire Catholic Church from the top on down to the tiniest parishes in the smallest towns,” Ms. Shaw told the newspaper in 2002.

Abuse Tracker has been hosted by Bishop-Accountability.org in Waltham, Mass., since 2006, and the website said on Monday that it would continue to operate the blog.

“In the 16 years since 2002, Kathy posted tens of thousands of articles in Abuse Tracker, transforming the news blog into an indispensable resource and record, used by everyone who works on the clergy abuse crisis or cares about it,” Terence McKiernan and Anne Barrett Doyle, who direct Bishop-Accountability.org, said in an email. “Thanks to Kathy and Abuse Tracker, every local development in the abuse crisis could be followed by people everywhere.”

Kathleen Ann Shaw was born on Aug. 1, 1945, in Gardner, Mass., to Alexander Shaw Jr., a foreman in a drill factory, and Evelyn (Burwood) Shaw. Her closest survivor is her sister, Jean Shaw.

She began working for a local radio station when she was 17 and graduated from Becker College and Assumption College, both in Worcester. While working as a reporter, she was also a mental health crisis counselor and clinician in the Worcester area.

Once she began reporting on the sexual abuse allegations in the early 1990s, Mr. Clohessy said, “Kathy was blown away by how extensive this horror is and, with deep empathy, she understood how devastating this is to people in a life-altering and a life-threatening way.”

She retired as a reporter in 2006 but continued to post articles for Abuse Tracker.

“Part of her legacy is that we fly higher and the view gets wider — closer to the Vatican’s own view,” Mr. McKiernan said. “Abuse Tracker includes other countries now, and other abuse besides clergy abuse.

“As a result, solidarity increases across regions and countries,” he added. “Abused Olympic gymnasts and abused altar boys have common cause, especially in changing the laws.

“Kathy opened our minds,” he said.

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