NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Feted Fairfield alum indicted for abuse in Haiti

Tom Roberts | Oct. 13, 2009

Douglas Perlitz in 2004 (AP/The Connecticut Post/Jeff Bustraan)

A Fairfield University alumnus heralded in the past as a model product of Jesuit education was indicted last month by a federal grand jury in Connecticut for sexually abusing some of the young Haitian boys he was supposedly helping.

Douglas Perlitz, 39, who received significant contributions toward his work with youth in Haiti from the campus community and from Catholics in the Bridgeport, Conn., diocese, was indicted on seven counts of traveling outside the United States with the intent of having sex with minors and three counts of engaging in sexual conduct with minors in a foreign country. The offenses allegedly involved nine boys during a 10-year period.

Perlitz, a 1992 graduate of Fairfield, first traveled to Haiti as a volunteer during his junior year. He later returned to Haiti and in 1997 founded Project Pierre Toussaint, a home and school for Haitian boys in Cap Haitien on the country?s northern coast. In 2002, Fairfield invited him to be the commencement speaker.

According to the indictment, Perlitz bribed street children with the promise of food and shelter, foreign currency, cell phones and ?other benefits? in exchange for sexual acts. The indictment also charges that Perlitz showed ?homosexual pornography? to children ?as part of his grooming process.?

?When questioned about why he permitted minors to sleep in his room,? the indictment says, ?Perlitz would attempt to conceal his sexual abuse of the minors by stating that it was common in Haiti for children and adults to sleep together, or he would state that the particular minor was having a lot of difficulty.?

A primary supporter of the project was Jesuit Fr. Paul Carrier, director of campus ministry at Fairfield until he was abruptly moved from the position in 2006. Carrier set up the Haiti Fund Inc., the funding arm of Perlitz?s project. According to the indictment, a total of $2 million was moved from the Haiti Fund to an account controlled by Perlitz. Some of it, investigators said, was used to pay boys to engage in sexual acts.

In recent weeks, Carrier had dropped from sight but the Jesuits broke their silence on his activities Oct. 1 when the New England Province of Jesuits released a statement saying the province was cooperating with the U.S.

attorney regarding Carrier?s whereabouts.

The statement also said that Carrier ?currently has no assignment and is not performing any public ministry.?

Paul Kendrick, a Fairfield alumnus and an advocate for victims of sexual abuse, said he was unable to get any information on Carrier despite repeated queries to the New England Province. Kendrick had traveled to Haiti and visited Perlitz?s operation in April 2003. Perlitz was not present at the time of his visit, Kendrick said in a recent phone interview with *NCR*, but Kendrick said he was impressed with the operation. But when allegations surfaced about the project, Kendrick pressed the Jesuits for answers about Carrier, who, he said, had visited the school and homes in Haiti frequently.

Carrier, now identified in news reports as the ?religious leader? referred to in the indictment, selected the Haiti Fund?s board, whose members included influential figures in the Bridgeport diocese. Among the board members were Philip Allen Lacovara, the attorney who represented the diocese in several recent high-profile court cases, including the failed attempt to block release of documents relating to clergy sexual abuse cases, and his wife, Madeline. She is a member of the Dames of Malta and he is listed as legal counsel for the Knights of Malta, a Catholic service organization that has also donated significant sums to the Haiti Fund.

Richard Markert, an attorney hired by the Haiti Fund board to oversee an investigation of Project Pierre Toussaint, said in a recent phone interview with *NCR* that the board first became aware of allegations against Perlitz in late 2007 when Haitian radio personality Cyrus Sibert began to make reference to the possibility of abuse.

The board conducted a months-long investigation, which included conversations with the Haitian national police. Haitian authorities, unknown to the Haiti Fund board, had begun their own investigation. Markert said Michael P. McCooey, by then chairman of the Haiti Fund, met with Haitian officials in August 2008. Additionally, U.S. authorities investigated the allegations before presenting evidence to the federal grand jury that delivered the indictment.

A report of the Haiti Fund?s internal investigation was presented to the board in July 2008, after which Perlitz was removed as director. At the same time there was a reshuffling of the board and McCooey was named chairman and president, replacing Carrier, who had resigned.

A number of other members of the Haiti Fund board also resigned, in apparent protest of the decision to dismiss Perlitz and of a letter from McCooey to supporters of the project reporting the allegations and the firing.

In September 2008, two months after the initial report of the investigation to the board, a dozen supporters of Perlitz, many if not all of them former Haiti Fund board members, followed McCooey?s letter with a scathing critique of the board?s investigation and the firing. The letter, sent to the same supporters who received McCooey?s letter, argued that the investigation was influenced by Haitian corruption and by intimidation and bribery of some of the witnesses. Among the signatories were Carrier and the Lacovaras.

In 11 detailed bullet points, the letter argues that Perlitz was denied due process; that many board members resigned because of the manner in which the investigation was handled; that information regarding intimidation and bribery, documented by two American volunteers, was not shared with most of the board; and that the ?Haitian staff member being used as a key source of information by the board is the same person who was reportedly intimidating the boys.?

They further argue that Haitian business leaders, American volunteers who worked on the project, human rights workers and others ?do not believe these allegations.?

Perlitz was arrested Sept. 16 in Colorado, where he had been living, by agents of the U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement Service and will face legal proceedings in Connecticut.

Fairfield University said it will investigate the use of donations from the school to the project.

The Haiti Fund has been depleted, and the school and residences that were part of Project Pierre Toussaint have been closed. McCooey said the properties, including a rural, 15-acre walled campus, are being guarded. ?We intend to transition this,? he said in an interview with *NCR*. McCooey said the intent is to ?partner with another organization? to reopen the project sometime in the future.

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