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Sent: Sunday, February 01, 2004 6:34 AM
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Naperville man to file abuse lawsuit against accused teacher

By Bill Bird
STAFF WRITER

A young father from Naperville is expected to become the fourth man to sue a Naperville School District 203 teacher accused of sexually molesting high school students while he was a teacher at a Catholic high school in Chicago in the 1980s.

Attorney Joseph G. Klest confirmed he was hired Friday afternoon to file a civil lawsuit in Cook County Circuit Court. It will seek unspecified financial damages for his new client from Philip A. Cappelleri, the physical-education coordinator and a teacher and coach at Jefferson Junior High School, Klest said.

Klest would not identify the new client, saying the man has not yet decided whether he wants his name made public. The decision on whether to divulge his name or instead be listed in the lawsuit as a "John Doe" should be made within the next week or two, when court documents and other legal paperwork are completed, Klest said.

The new plaintiff, like the three men who filed civil lawsuits against Cappelleri on Jan. 22, is a graduate of De La Salle Institute in Chicago and was a student of Cappelleri's when he taught there in the 1980s.

Klest would say only that his new client is in his 30s and lives in Naperville with his wife and their child. The man is believed to be a year younger than Patrick Joseph Sierzega, 36, of Chicago's southwest side, his other client in the Cappelleri litigation, Klest said.

Sierzega and brothers Christopher Alberts and J. Arnie Alberts have accused Cappelleri of sexually abusing them at various

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locations on the De La Salle Institute grounds. Sierzega was a member of the school's football team, with Cappelleri as his coach.

Cappelleri, 53, of Lisle, is on administrative leave from District 203, where he has taught for 12 years. District officials are conducting an internal investigation of Cappelleri, who also is Jefferson Junior High's football coach and director of intramurals.

District 203 Superintendent Alan Leis said Thursday that "new information" concerning Cappelleri had come to light, although he would not discuss what that information entailed.

Leis on Friday confirmed he was referring to an anonymous letter dated Tuesday and addressed to him, Klest, DuPage County State's Attorney Joseph E. Birkett and two other men. A copy of the letter was obtained Friday by The Naperville Sun.

The letter's author said he believes the allegations against Cappelleri "to be 100 percent true, as I have had a similar experience with the man."

"Unfortunately, I do not feel comfortable coming forward publicly at this time, as I am trying to deal with the impact this abuse has inflicted upon my life," the letter continued. "It is a secret that I've been trying to forget for more than 10 years."

The letter writer urged law enforcement officials to conduct "a full investigation" of Cappelleri. He identified 1993 and 1994 as the "time period ... of Mr. Cappelleri's career that I was affected."

In addition to De La Salle Institute, Cappelleri has taught at Driscoll Catholic High School in Addison, Willowbrook High School in Villa Park and Madison Junior High School in Naperville.

The letter writer said Cappelleri also coached sports teams at his Cap's Camp weekend clinic in Oak Brook and the defunct Midwest Sports Baseball Academy, which he said had facilities in far north suburban Waukegan and Plymouth, Ind.

Leis said District 203 officials are investigating the letter and trying to determine the validity of its claims. He did not say how much credence officials might be attaching to it in light of the author's reluctance to identify himself.

"It's traditional that, when these things happen and information comes to you, some of it is going to be more anonymous than others," Leis said.

"I don't know about the reliability or seriousness of any piece of information," Leis said. "I just want to assure people that we are following up" on the letter, he said.

The Alberts brothers are represented in their lawsuit against Cappelleri by attorney Jeffrey R. Anderson of St. Paul, Minn. Anderson did not return any of three telephone calls placed Friday to

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his office that sought comment on Friday's developments.

Cappelleri has referred inquiries from local media to his attorney, Raymond Garza. Garza on Friday said he had no knowledge of the letter sent to District 203, and still was waiting to see a copy of the lawsuit filed Jan. 22.

Contact staff writer Bill Bird at wbird@scn1.com or (630) 416-5274.

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