

Conversations with My Molester

a journey of faith

What is the cost of forgiveness?
Michael Mack's prize-winning one-man play
about betrayal and grace
— a true story

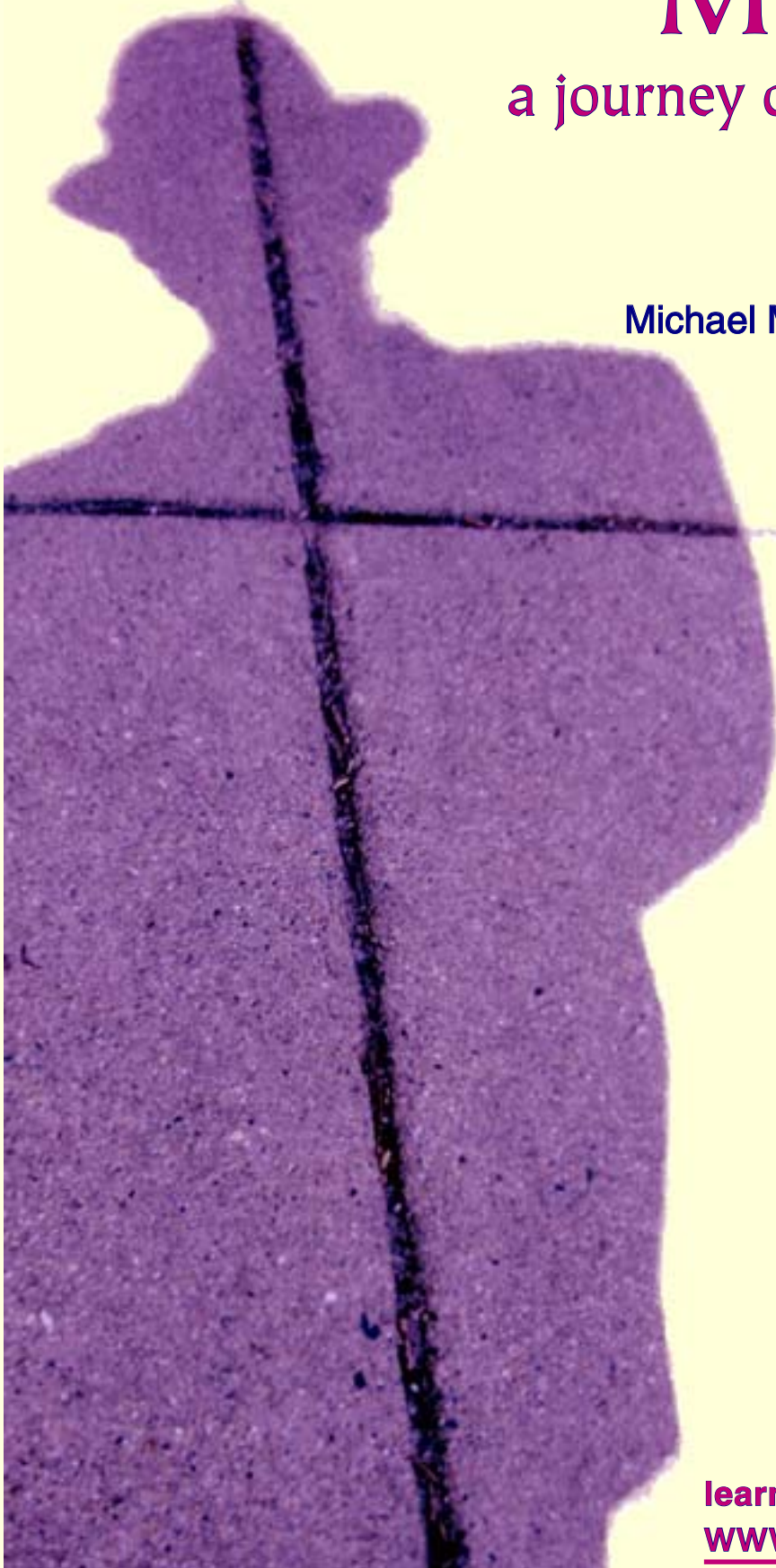
"Powerful conversations"
The Washington Post

"Given a standing ovation"
The New York Times

"Spellbinding...an amazing
journey of forgiveness"
Cambridge Chronicle

"A very important play...
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CBS News Radio

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www.michaelmacklive.com



Past Press Release

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith

Catholic Paulist Center Tackles Abuse Legacy Hosts “Conversations with My Molester” To Promote Healing

[Boston, MA] In a remarkable alliance between the Catholic Church and a clergy sexual abuse survivor, Boston’s Paulist Center community will host four performances by playwright Michael Mack of his autobiographical play “Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith” from January 11th to February 2nd. Discussions after each show will focus on healing, and will feature Mack and one of the Paulist Fathers – an order of Roman Catholic priests – welcoming into a “conversation” anyone impacted by clergy abuse.

“We open the doors of the Paulist Center to Michael Mack’s fine play in the hopes that ‘Conversations With My Molester’ might open the hearts of those who have been wounded by the clergy sexual abuse scandal,” Paulist Father Rick Walsh said.

In his solo show, Mack recounts the conversations that helped to restore his faith after being sexually abused as a boy. “Father Walsh is offering a remarkable opportunity for frank dialogue – one that mirrors key conversations in my own journey. The play at its heart is about reconciliation, social justice, and healing – which is also the mission of the Paulists.”

Fr. Rick Walsh agreed to be the face of the clergy in a candid question-and-answer session following each performance at the order’s downtown Boston landmark location. He hopes that an empathic dialogue can help survivors find their way to their spiritual home – whether in the Catholic faith or outside it.

“We have not forgotten,” said Fr. Walsh. “This is a story that needs to be told – and a story that needs to be heard.”

“Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith” is a 90-minute lyric play directed by Boston stage veteran Daniel Gidron. It portrays Mack’s full-circle sojourn from his clergy sexual abuse as a child to his spiritual return to the Church decades later. The play netted rave reviews when it debuted nearly a year ago at the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre at Boston University.

Two months later in March, Mack filled the hall of his own St. Paul's Catholic Church in Harvard Square with another moving performance. And now Boston's Paulist Center – known for its focus on reconciliation and social justice – has embraced Mack's play for a 4-weekend run.

When he was 11, Mack's favorite priest invited him to the rectory to help with "a costume" – an event that left Mack deeply shaken, and wrestling with troubling questions about spirituality and sexuality. He imagined one day meeting his abuser for a conversation, and in 2008 had that chance – landing on his former priest's doorstep. What happened next was beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Mack, a graduate of the MIT Writing Program, is an acclaimed Cambridge poet best known for his multi-character solo play "Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues" – about his mother's life with, and recovery from, schizophrenia. Mack has been much in demand for the play, which he began while a student at MIT, and has since performed at the US Library of Congress, Off-Off-Broadway at the Times Square Arts Center, at Harvard and Yale universities, and for scores of mental health conferences – even at the FBI's 32nd Annual Hostage Negotiation Seminar.

Learn more at
www.michaelmacklive.com

"Conversations with My Molester: a Journey of Faith" will be performed over four consecutive weekends at the Paulist Center, located at 5 Park Street in Boston – half a block from the Park Street MBTA station.

Reviews

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith

Daniel Gewertz

Theater Critic

***Boston Herald* (2011)**

"From the title of Michael Mack's extraordinary one-man play, *Conversations With My Molester*, one might think this work is all about explicit confrontation. But the conversations in Michael Mack's play are often inward, and the confrontations, while brave, are more concerned with revelation than anger.

Mack does not shy away from the disturbing elements of his experiences as an 11 year-old victim of a priest's sexual crimes, yet this picture of a man rediscovering his past also manages to be funny, fond-hearted, and even comforting. It is about how power corrupts and destroys in the outward world, but it is also a work that never forgets the inner self, and the big journey that self is capable of undertaking."

Father Michael McGarry, CSP

President

The Paulist Fathers

"When I first heard the title, *Conversations with My Molester*, I expected a journey through the experience of victimhood. However therapeutic this might be for a victim, it did not strike me as the way I wanted to spend an evening – even though I speak regularly to victims of clerical sexual abuse, and am committed to healing.

But I attended *Conversations with My Molester* and am very glad I did. It is well-written, witty, insightful, engaging, and true. The author does not stir the pot of his own victimhood and demonize his perpetrator as monstrous. Rather, he admits the texture of their shared humanity while never compromising on the fundamental evil of the abuse. Without over-simplicity, he paints a canvas of his own healing, still in process.

There is hope, there is an understanding of "the other," and there is some reconciliation – not in neat little knots, but in the complexity of growing more and more into a healed self. Finally, his generous availability for questions after the production (complemented by a priest's presence) allowed for a conversation that few such plays afford.

This is a powerful experience not to be missed."

Michael Prager

Editor (ret.)

Boston Globe

"Emotionally powerful, cleverly written, affectingly performed... Well worth seeing."

Kathleen Spivack

Poet & Writer

Pulitzer Prize-nominated Author of *The Beds We Lie In* and 7 other acclaimed books

"Michael Mack is an outsider artist: daring, original, talented, and deep. His language is breathtaking, and his theatre work rips you open and heals you at the same time.

Honest and powerful, Michael explores the implications of the abuser-abusee relationship. It is complex / multiple as he tries to understand his situation (yes, women will identify as well) and come to terms with it.

There is no self-pity in this theatre piece; that already is a feat. Mack is a playwright-performer of genius who has been working quietly for years at the fringes. His work is very important, and hopefully will reach wider audiences in the future. His last play, about dealing with his mother's schizophrenia, which he worked on for over ten years, is equally wrenching and powerful.

Michael was raised a Catholic, and that definitely contributes to his stunning imagery and references. This man is an amazingly talented artist, and he is relevant in ways I cannot even convey."

Barbara Thorp

**Director, Office of Pastoral Support and Child Protection
Catholic Archdiocese of Boston**

"Michael Mack, in his powerful one man play, invites us to join him on an intimate and deeply personal journey of profound suffering and redemption. During this long Lent of clergy sexual abuse, we see hope in one man's pilgrimage through the darkness. We all should have the courage of a Michael Mack to delve into the corners of our life story seeking the face of mercy and hope."

Emily Randall, LICSW

**Director, North Harbor Adult Services
North Suffolk Mental Health Association**

"Rarely have I witnessed a work of such force and honesty. This riveting piece about Michael Mack's experience being molested by a priest at age 11 (and his journey as he confronts both his molester and his past) is poetic, disturbing, redeeming, and deeply beautiful. It has relevance for lovers of theatre and the arts, therapists of any discipline who work with survivors, people of faith, and anyone with a heart. Do not miss this."

David Allan Boucher

**Radio Host
Boston Magic 106.7 FM**

"A thought-provoking show for people of faith – will have you thinking long after you leave the performance. I have seen the show twice, and each time it has left me speechless. I recommend seeing it if the topic even remotely interests you."

Sparkman Clark

Theater Critic

Times Square Chronicles

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey We All Should See

"Michael Mack had a Catholic boy's dream in the 1960s – to become a priest when he grew up. As a young boy full of light and worship, there was nobody Mack admired more than his church pastor. But all of that changed when the man he looked up to and trusted sexually abused him when he was 11 years old. What followed were countless years of haunting and devastating pain, until Mack finally resolved to track down his former pastor for a conversation. That is when his story takes a shocking new turn. Now, decades later, Michael Mack shares his experiences and journey onstage in his one-man act: *Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith*.

Traveling through this play will send you on an emotional journey that stretches over the course of Mack's lifetime. You will feel the wonder and passion for faith that he felt as a boy. You will experience the fear and anxiety that consumed his later years. You will be taken through anger, resentment, and shock... but also compassion, forgiveness and resolve. The intimate space of the Jewel Box Theatre allows Mack to connect with every member of the audience in a truly extraordinary way.

There is one word that accurately describes this play: profound. Mack recounts his memories as if he were giving a sermon, his delivery soulful yet captivating. He has the audience traveling with him through his past and reliving his memories with him. I could feel the fear and anxiety pulse through my veins as Mack recounted how his pastor invited him up to the rectory of the church, shutting the door with a jolt behind him. My stomach churned as Mack revealed how the single word "suck" haunted him in the years following. And I sat at the edge of my seat stunned as the revelations Mack made in the later decades of his life brought the play to its striking climax.

An award-winning poet, playwright and actor, Michael Mack invites his audiences to look through a window into the darkest corners of his life. And with his story comes a heartwarming sense of healing and resolution. Mack's writing and performance commendable, but the most remarkable aspect about this play is his courage – the courage to reveal one's soul in a manner that is truly (as I said before) profound. This play is deeply inspiring and is more than worth the time to see."

About

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith

About the Play

Like many Catholic boys in the 1960s, Michael Mack grew up wanting to be a priest. That dream ended at age 11 when he was sexually abused by his pastor, an experience that haunted him for decades. Forty years later, Mack landed on his former pastor's doorstep for a conversation, and what happened next went beyond anything he ever imagined.

Mack's solo play *Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith* recounts that odyssey. It premiered at Boston Playwright's Theatre at Boston University in January 2012, marking the 10-year anniversary of Boston's clergy abuse crisis.

With veteran director Daniel Gidron at the helm, Mack's 90-minute lyric play netted rave reviews for chronicling the events that took him full circle away from – and back to – the Catholic Church, offering a moving testament to hope and renewal.

About Michael Mack

Award-winning poet, playwright, and actor Michael Mack served in the US Air Force before graduating from the Writing Program at MIT (where he studied under Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin).

His poems have appeared in *America*, the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. They have aired on NPR and are anthologized in *Best Catholic Writing* (2005 and 2007).

Awards include two Artist Grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council (the most prestigious and competitive arts award offered by the state) in 2013 for *Conversations with My Molester* and in 2005 for *Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues*. Also a Best Solo Play 2013 nomination by the Independent reviewers of New England (IRNE), First Prize in the National Writers Circle Poetry Competition, and an Eloranta Fellowship that funded a residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre for the Arts in Ireland.

Mack has performed at the US Library of Congress, Foxwoods Resort & Casino, Harvard and Yale Universities, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, Chicago's Blue Note nightclub, the Austin International Poetry Festival, Off-Off-Broadway at the Times Square Arts Center, and for 650 law enforcement officers at the FBI's 32nd Annual Hostage Negotiation Seminar.

His first solo play, *Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues*, explores his mother's life with schizophrenia, and he has performed it nationwide in theatrical settings and for consumers and providers of mental health services.

Michael Mack is a parishioner at St. Paul Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Washington Post

Favoring Forgiveness over Fury

In one-man play, clergy-abuse victim recounts his journey

By Michelle Boorstein

The Washington Post: May 3, 2014

For decades, Michael Mack imagined conversations with the priest who had invited him, a skinny 11-year-old, into the rectory to make costumes for a church play, molested him and then vanished.

Throughout Mack's childhood in the Washington area and then later as an adult in Massachusetts, the unanswered questions ran through his life "like a thread," he said.

Sometimes he'd picture himself asking the priest something basic: What was *that* about? Or the priest apologizing. Other times, his visions were detailed: the two finding that they shared things in common, like poetry. Or when the clergy sex-abuse scandal exploded in the early 2000s, Mack envisioned himself with the priest on a traveling, healing church road show.

But it wasn't until a few years ago, when he attempted to actually have those conversations, that Mack, now 57, began healing. And for the past two years, he has been telling the story of that journey in a one-man play, "Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith." The show, which Mack is bringing to his home region Saturday for the first time, recounts his attempts to contact the priest, the unexpected people he meets on that journey, and the way forgiveness has helped loosen the grip abuse has had on his psyche.



Michael Mack reflecting on his one-man play *Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith*. (Jahi Chikwendiu / The Washington Post)

A lifelong spiritual seeker, Mack wound up returning to Catholicism and says he ponders reviving his childhood dream of becoming a priest.

"My face drizzling its festival of yes to this mathematics of forgiveness as I sob and let go," he says in the play. "Slip downstream like a tattered salmon, into my portion of ocean, offer aloud a prayer, for my molester, that wherever he is, he knows the freedom I know now."

Clergy and abuse survivors who have seen the show, which was performed several times in the Boston area after opening in 2012, say that audiences have marveled at Mack's lack of fury and readiness to forgive, calling it healing in a way that might not have happened a decade ago, when rage and litigation seemed the only appropriate reactions.

"I think the wise powers that be are confronting the issue and looking for ways to deal with it," Mack said in an interview this week. "At first, the church wanted to deny as much as possible. But now it's more about atonement."

Searching for the priest

Mack spent his childhood in the 1960s moving around Northwest Washington and suburban Maryland before his mother's struggle with schizophrenia prompted his father to send him and his siblings to Brevard, N.C., to live with an aunt for a year. It was there that a priest who befriended his family abused him one spring Sunday after finding the boy alone in the church playing piano and inviting him into the rectory to make costumes.

A few days later, the priest left town, and soon after, Mack's father took his children back to the D.C. area. Mack kept the incident a secret but immediately began imagining conversations he'd have with the man. Many were a search for explanations; others had Mack playing the role of confession-taker and forgiver.

It wasn't until the clergy sex-abuse scandal erupted in Mack's adopted home town of Boston a decade ago that he started to talk to others, his brother, a friend. He typed the priest's name into an Internet search engine and was shocked to see that the man lived a short distance away, in central Massachusetts. That began a years-long period of Mack slowly moving closer to speaking with his abuser. He called and hung up. He wrote a letter but waited many months before deciding to deliver it.

What happens with the priest and Mack's ultimate conversation with his molester are spoilers he didn't want to divulge before Saturday's show, at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. But it doesn't give too much away to say that the show includes powerful conversations with his abuser's priest-friends and then with people who live in Brevard, which Mack visited in 2011.

He sees his abuser in a very different light during that visit and accepts the invitation of a younger priest now working at the Brevard parish to come to Mass and confession. This

homecoming service – his first in years – reveals the dramatic relief Mack felt being able to finally grieve in his native spiritual language.

The play conveys Mack's lifelong quest for that joyful, open 11-year-old boy he had once been. And for boyhood in general. The boy for whom "praying was sweet breathing." The boy whose body became "an empty rowboat" as he tried to float, disassociated, from his abuse. The play includes a scary scene when, as an older camp counselor, Mack invites an 8-year-old homesick boy to sit on his bed.

"You lean closer, his hair a drift of baby shampoo." Nothing happens, but the idea of boyhood innocence remains a drug.

Power of forgiveness

The topic of child sexual abuse is far more in the open than it was when Mack was abused. With Pope Benedict in 2008 becoming the first pope to meet publicly – in Washington – with clergy-abuse survivors, Pope Francis personally asking for forgiveness and appointing a survivor to be his adviser on the topic, and the number of reported complaints in the United States down, the issue seems to have moved into a new phase.

Yet this is not a subject many church leaders want to air out.

And it's not as if life is simple now for Mack, an MIT-trained poet who also wrote a play about his mother's schizophrenia. Until Thursday afternoon, he wasn't sure if any of his many relatives in the Washington area would come to the play, as they have never been to its showings around Boston. (As of Friday, two were planning to attend.)

David Clohessy, a survivor and national director of the country's largest support group, SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), said it's not uncommon for survivors to fantasize about conversations with their abusers – and some seek them out. But often to disappointment.

Even if the meetings either don't happen or disappoint, Clohessy said, "the overwhelming majority of survivors find healing and forgive" on their own, even though the public face of survivors is often one seeking justice in the courts or media.

"I think there is a great and justifiable emphasis [among survivors] on the positive impact of forgiveness," he commented. "More and more survivors understand that letting anger eat away at you is self-destructive."

On Friday, rehearsing the play in the seminary chapel, Mack's voice cracked during a scene about his 2008 return to Brevard, where he considered the image of a boy looking out the rectory window.

"If he could speak, what might he shout," Mack says. "The face of a boy willing to do anything."

Before his shows, Mack sometimes studies photos from his childhood to come closer to the red-lipped little boy shown during an era of packed parishes and huge Catholic school classes. Two images show him from that year in Brevard, playing in a country river, grinning up from a raft. Mack wonders if the photos were before or after – or, as he says in the play, his mind has already written the abuse "letter by letter into the tissues of his body, encoding it in indelible ink."

"The imprint is there," he said in the chapel. "The question is what we do with it."

The New York Times

Private Pain, Played Out on Public Stage

By Katharine Q. Seelye
New York Times: January 13, 2013

BOSTON — When he was a boy in North Carolina in the 1960s, Michael Mack wanted to be a priest, until his priest sexually molested him. He prayed he would forget the experience, but, he said, “the memory tingled like a phantom limb.”

As he grew up, he revisited the moment over and over in his mind. He told no one about it, this secret that was obsessing him, “binding me to someone I never talked to, never saw, but who lived and breathed in my memory.”

In 2002, The Boston Globe began documenting the widespread sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests. The articles, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, prompted Mr. Mack, who was by then living in Cambridge, to consider finding the priest who had abused him.



Michael Mack was given a standing ovation on Friday after performing “Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith.” (Photograph by Gretchen Ertl for The New York Times)

In 2005, he plugged the name into Google and discovered that the priest was living less than an hour away. Eventually, he arrived on the priest’s doorstep.

The result is “Conversations With My Molester: A Journey of Faith,” which had its debut last year at the Boston Playwrights’ Theater at Boston University to mark the 10th anniversary of the Globe series. Now, Mr. Mack, 56, is reviving the nonfiction drama at the Paulist Center, a Catholic community center in downtown Boston that is dedicated to social justice.

On Friday night, about 50 people attended the opening, which was followed by a question-and-answer session with Mr. Mack and the Rev. Rick Walsh of the Paulist Center. The play and subsequent discussion showed how the priest scandal, stemming from events that took place decades ago, continues to haunt the lives of the victims and reverberate throughout the church.

The opening happened to coincide with an announcement by the Archdiocese of Boston, the epicenter of the pedophile priest scandal, that it was further consolidating its parishes in the face of continued low attendance at Mass, a priest shortage and lackluster fund-raising. The announcement was just the latest sign of the toll that the scandal, along with various demographic changes, has taken on the archdiocese. It has been forced to sell valuable property and close parishes and has paid out tens of millions of dollars in settlements to victims of sexual abuse.

Then there is the toll on the victims. And that is the focus of Mr. Mack's lyrical drama, in which he is the sole performer on a relatively spare stage for 90 minutes.

One of the most unsettling moments of the performance was when Mr. Mack revealed that as a camp counselor when he was in high school, he had come close to seducing a vulnerable, 8-year-old in whom he recognized himself.

"You lean closer, his hair a drift of baby shampoo," Mr. Mack said as he acted out the scene. "Your face so close to the heat of his cheek you smell his breath, like apples." At that point, the images of his own molesting came rushing back, and he stopped himself before anything happened.

That admission — that he had almost re-enacted the very crime perpetrated against him — drew particular praise from the audience. And it led to a general discussion of one of the little-acknowledged effects of molesting, that some victims become perpetrators.

Another effect of sexual abuse shown in the play was the simultaneous feelings of attraction and revulsion that persist in memory. When Mr. Mack was 11 and abused by his priest, he felt half giddy and half terrified. He also felt special, but the complexity of feelings was too much to make sense of.

He found himself "powerfully attracted, and powerfully repelled, finding self-loathing its own dismal ecstasy," as he said in the play. This only added to his sense of guilt. Just remembering the scene so often, he said, proved that he was responsible for the crime, that he had "wanted it to happen, invited it to happen, made it happen, deserved it."

After the performance, Mr. Mack was asked why he had not been vengeful toward the priest who had abused him.

"It was not true to my experience," Mr. Mack replied, in part because victims blame themselves. Besides, he said, the play was his revenge.

“By telling my story, I am making this my truth,” he said. “I’m claiming it and getting it back.”

The play is Mr. Mack’s second theatrical work, the first having been a narrative about his mother’s schizophrenia, called “Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues.” He has performed it for numerous mental health groups and is preparing a third work on the broad theme of recovery.

Mr. Mack was a student at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1980s when he took an elective course in poetry. He loved it and transferred into M.I.T.’s writing program, where he studied with the poet Maxine Kumin.

After he graduated in 1988, he supported himself by doing technical writing for M.I.T. as he developed as a poet, and now his art is supporting him. He no longer wants to be a priest. But he has returned to the church and hopes his “journey of faith” as described in the play will help other victims heal and find reconciliation.

“I do feel like this is a kind of calling,” he said. “This is where I feel like I’m serving the most and growing the most. This is a very healing thing for me to do.”

Father Walsh, on stage with Mr. Mack for the post-play discussion, told him that he nonetheless was doing something “very priestly.”

“You are offering a sense of forgiveness. You’re helping people to see,” Father Walsh said. “You can reach people through this medium that I can’t reach.”

That seemed evident after the discussion and after most people had left. It was close to midnight, and workers were setting up tables for the next day’s event. Mr. Mack found himself sitting in the back of the room with a 43-year-old man who said his parents had sexually abused him. They were discussing Mr. Mack’s admission of pleasure in the abuse.

“One of the things that’s difficult is to know how to forgive yourself for taking pleasure in an experience that’s an awful experience,” Mr. Mack told him.

“It’s pleasurable, and it’s repulsive,” said the man, who wanted to remain anonymous. “It just does something to the brain, and that’s why so many survivors re-enact it — people unconsciously recreate the dynamic of how they were abused.”

The man said he was grateful to have seen the play because of its complexity. “It’s an incredible gift,” he said, “to be able to watch another survivor walk through the arc of this and get to a safe place.”

The Boston Globe

In ‘Conversations With My Molester,’ confronting memories of abuse

By Joel Brown
Boston Globe: March 28, 2012

In 1968, when he was 11 years old, Michael Mack was molested by his parish priest in North Carolina, he says, and his experience changed him in ways that took years to reveal themselves.

In 2002, when a series of Globe articles focused attention on the clergy abuse scandal in the Catholic church, poet and performer Mack began to talk seriously with friends about finding the priest. And finally, in 2005, the Cambridge resident plugged the priest’s name into Google.

“Amazingly, my abuser was not only still alive, but he was living very nearby,” says Mack, 55. “Having all my life imagined one day having a conversation with him, I decided to make the contact. . . . It was almost providential: ‘After all this time, all this distance, he’s right here? I can’t say no to this.’”

In January, Mack began performing “Conversations With My Molester: A Journey of Faith,” a lyric spoken-word piece about his experience with the priest, his struggles, and what happened after that Google search.

On Thursday, he will perform “Conversations” at his current parish, St. Paul Catholic Church, near Harvard Square. He says the performance is an act of reconciliation that’s appropriate at Lent.



Poet, playwright, and performer Michael Mack in “Conversations With My Molester: A Journey of Faith.” (Photo Credit: Timothy Hanson)

As a boy, Mack wanted to be a priest. “Conversations” offers his discomfiting, though not graphic, account of what happened to him at the church in Brevard, N.C., which he says took away that dream and haunted him throughout his life. He says that he found the priest was living in Massachusetts and had been accused of similar abuse by at least two others. (The name of the priest, who has since died, and a few other identifying details have been changed in the play, Mack says.)

Some friends warned him to be careful of possible pitfalls in getting in touch with the priest. “What I try to recount in the play is both sides of it, the amazing possibilities that this opened up, and the dread,” he says.

He drove to confront the priest, then turned away at the last minute, he says. It took him two years to simply mail a letter asking for a meeting. What happened next was hardly what he had hoped. But then with a trip back to Brevard and his old church last September, Mack says, he finally found a degree of healing. “It was there I really felt I was back in the church,” he says.

As an adult, Mack joined the Air Force, got married and divorced, and eventually entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study management. He ended up focused on writing classes there, with teachers including the poet Maxine Kumin. “One of the first things you learn in writing class is write what you know, and that’s kind of where I began,” says Mack.

He began to write about his mother’s schizophrenia and his memories of the priest, he recalls. “It was kind of a laying open of the soul. . . . I had a need to grapple with this in some way. It was something I kept pretty much to myself for decades. I couldn’t articulate yet how profoundly it had shaped me, and now I had an opportunity to shape it through this creative process.”

After graduating from MIT in 1988, he worked as a freelance technical writer while publishing his poetry. Eventually he began going to poetry slams and open mikes. His writings about his mother’s mental illness evolved into his first major theater piece, “Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues.”

“These experiences . . . profoundly shaped me, and what writing and then performing gave me was an opportunity to explore them in a different way, in a way that’s not unlike therapy, which I’ve had a couple of yearlong sessions with,” he says. “These were situations where I as a child really didn’t have very much control. As an adult and an artist I have a lot more control and am able to work with the material in a much more proactive way.”

He has performed “Hearing Voices” many times over more than a decade, often in front of groups of mental health professionals or families facing similar issues. After a number of readings, he debuted “Conversations With My Molester” at the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre in January, hoping to reach the same kind of audience.

Rev. Michael Drea, pastor of St. Paul, attended a performance, and soon after it was agreed Mack would bring it to the church.

“The thing that I hear most often and that made me really want to move forward is just how healing it is,” Mack says. “Both in the depth it goes into about the difficulty and the trespass, and in how it ultimately resolves in redemption.”

“It pierces one’s heart,” says Rev. James Savage, parochial vicar at St. Paul and one of Mack’s supporters at the church. “I think that what he tried to do was on the one hand show the darkness of what had happened with him, and at the same time it showed his journey to find a way to deal with it, which led eventually to his spiritual healing.”

Was there any trepidation about hosting this performance? Rev. Savage notes that the play is “not lurid” and says, “You have to look at the truth. Granted, the problem of clergy sex abuse is a terrible indictment against the church and the perpetrators themselves, but as we found out, it serves no purpose running away from it or hiding it or denying it. . . . The best thing is to take that which happened in darkness and bring it into the light.”

Mack refers to the sections of the play as poems or “lyric works,” but “Conversations” is a theater piece with a few props. Daniel Gidron directs, as he did at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre.

As a writer and performer, Mack says, “I can shape that material and, with the help of the muse, who works in her own way, create something hopefully cathartic, something beautiful and something that can serve others in some way.”

The Pilot

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Play addresses lessons, suffering of abuse

By Christopher S. Pineo
The Pilot: April 6, 2012

CAMBRIDGE -- Since debuting his one-man show in January, Michael Mack has performed for various audiences at different venues, but never a Catholic audience in a Catholic church.

That changed when Mack took the play "Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith" home to his own parish. On March 29, he performed the play at St. Paul in Cambridge and took questions afterward from the clergy, parishioners and guests.

The play disclosed decades of Mack's life for the audience, in a narrative form aided only by the props on stage.

At age 11, abuse at the hands of his own priest in North Carolina left Mack traumatized. Mack used the words "wrestled" and "grappled" as he described his struggles with faith and sexuality after the event.

"Let's just say it was a dark angel that I wrestled with for a long time," Mack said. The passing of years brought Mack the chance to meet the priest who abused him, and inspired Mack to create the play that he said remains a work in progress.



Michael Mack performs his one man show "Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith" for nearly 200 guests, sponsored by Caring for the Soul: Faith in Recovery, The St. Paul Artist's Group, and The St. Paul Laity Group at St. Paul Catholic Church in Cambridge on March 29. (Pilot photo by Christopher S. Pineo)

Father Michael Drea said the church welcomed Mack to perform there as part of healing the damage from the clergy abuse crisis.

"I went to see the play when it was over at B.U. at the beginning of the year. I felt that Michael had really captured his own journey very, very well, and his own sense of reconciliation and peace with God and the Church," he said.

Mack debuted the 90-minute play, directed by Daniel Gidron, in January 2012 at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre at Boston University.

"I needed to do it initially as a way to grapple with one of the major events of my life," Mack said.

He also saw a chance for reconciliation on a greater scale, which contributed to his decision to open St. Paul for the performance.

"I also felt that he had a very balanced approach as he wrote that play and presented it," Father Drea said, "to show the effects of abuse not only within the Church, but within the wider context of society as well,"

Mack said he saw a need and a reason to allow audiences into his personal story by creating the play, which he wrote and performed.

He added that he felt a great connection with the audience that night because of sharing not only his story, but a common faith with the audience.

"This was the first time I have done it in a Catholic church, and done it for as large a Catholic audience. I felt like absolutely people were connecting with what I was talking about because this is a shared experience," he said.

He said he felt the performance gave the audience an opportunity to explore the events unveiled by the media in 2002.

After the performance, director of the Archdiocese of Boston's Office of Pastoral Support and Outreach Barbara Thorp joined the playwright on stage to field questions from the audience.

Thorp said she spoke to Mack about the play after an Advent Mass at St. Paul. She agreed to come and to let people know about the show.

"I was extraordinarily intrigued that someone would find a way of taking the path for their healing to tell their story through this one man play. I was also aware that when people tell their story, by virtue of telling it to someone, it is an enormous act of trust," Thorp said.

"I have never heard of anyone doing something like Michael has done, and so I was delighted that he had invited me," she said.

Questions after the play moved quickly from the personal experience of the creator, to the culpability of Church leadership in the crisis.

"It was not surprising to me. There are many aspects of the crisis, and one of them is certainly the element of the Church leadership, and of the response and care of the Church leadership at the time," she said.

Mack said he felt grateful to have Thorp with him on stage.

He also said he thought the chance for the audience to ask questions provided him an important opportunity to reach out and interact directly with the audience.

"The first thought that came to my mind was, 'This topic means a lot of different things to a lot of different people.' I was glad to have somebody to share the Q&A with me, to field some questions that I might not have yet the resources to handle," Mack said.

Thorp said the experience Mack shared on the stage should reach audiences, and in particular, Catholics, in order for the lessons from the crisis to remain unforgotten, while allowing the faithful to move on.

"He carries us forward with him by being vulnerable to share the very intimate and painful details of his past," Thorp said.

He said he has used the question and answer sessions from previous performances to develop the play further.

"Having created something like this, it is not enough to just say, 'OK, now it's done. Problem solved. Move on,'" said Mack.

"As I talked with people about it, it informed the play. It informed the shape that it took. That is another way that I feel that this is very much a community experience," Mack said.

"For several years I had, more or less, the show through the first three acts. The part that ended on the outrage, that could, 10 years ago, be a perfectly legitimate ending to really reflect the outrage that so many people in the Church and outside of the Church were feeling," he said.

For Mack, a time when a boy had a fearful encounter with a priest gave way to a time when a man set out to confront his abuser after years of struggling with his own sense of identity.

"I have to say that the word 'victim' is one that I have never been entirely comfortable with, and I use the word personally in quotes, because it suggests a kind of powerlessness. Certainly as a child I think that it was true. As a child I was a victim. As a man I don't have to be," Mack said.

Parishioners in the audience described their feelings immediately after the show.

"Is there something that we are offering to enable people both to articulate these things, I suppose, and to possibly be able to find some level of peace? Not closure, as Michael says, just a measure of peace," Laura Garcia, 56, a parishioner at St. Paul said, restating her question from the discussion segment.

"Theater offers that kind of communal sense that is healing. In this particular context, I think it can offer people some shared healing," said George Bard, 59, a parishioner at St. Paul.

Mack's next performance of the play will be held at the Paulist Center in Downtown Boston on June 16, 2012 at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit www.michaelmacklive.com.

Cambridge Chronicle

America's oldest weekly, since 1846

Mack performs “Conversations with My Molester” at his church

By Andy Metzger

Cambridge Chronicle: March 23, 2012

Cambridge — It's the kind of thing that would have been completely unbelievable a decade ago, but Cambridge playwright Michael Mack is performing a one-man show at his Harvard Square Catholic church about sexual abuse he suffered decades ago at the hands of a priest.

“I was delighted that the parish is going to be the venue for hosting this,” said Barbara Thorp, director of the Office of Pastoral Outreach and Child Protection for the Boston Archdiocese.

Mack will perform “Conversations with my Molester” at Saint Paul Parish on Mount Auburn Street on Thursday, March 29 – the first performance he will give in a church.

“This is kind of a new angle on the play because it will be in a Catholic church, which is kind of where it all began – though not that church,” Mack said, over tea at the S&S Deli and Restaurant on Thursday.

It all began in the spring of 1968 when Mack was 11 years old, having moved from northern Virginia to his aunt's house in North Carolina when his mother went to a mental hospital. Mack

said he has been working on the script in one way or another since shortly after the local priest – who was about as old as Mack's dad – violated his trust.

“The anger that I felt was toward myself,” he said. “I have no memory of feeling anger towards him.” Mack said the play is a completely accurate telling of the abuse, and Mack's effort to have



Michael Mack, who is performing a one-man show called “Conversation With My Molester,” stops for a photo at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Harvard Square on Sunday afternoon, March 18, 2012. (Wicked Local staff photo by David Gordon)

that conversation with his molester. He said that at one point he had 35 different scenarios for how that conversation might go.

Mack loved the grandeur and ceremony of the clergy and dreamed of one day being a priest, but soon after the incident he quit being an altar boy and left the church. Mack joined the Air Force, and then went to MIT in 1985 to study management science. He finally started putting his imaginary conversations to paper when he switched his studies to poetry, studying under Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney and other greats.

In 2005, he typed the name of his abuser into a Google search engine and found that he had served a prison term for a nearly identical crime and was living only about a half hour's drive away in Central Massachusetts. Mack said the only fiction in the story is the abuser's name – changed to protect his family – and the small town he lived in, which becomes Worcester for the performance.

Mack worked up his courage and went to great efforts to have a conversation with his molester, though in the Thursday interview he was vague about whether he succeeded so that the mystery is not spoiled for those who go to see the performance.

When Mack's molester died he went to the funeral and buried his repulsion of the Catholic Church and got back into the habit of attending mass.

"I couldn't square what happened with that priest with what I believed," Mack said. He explained his belief as, "I believe with all my heart in something. I believe in something and I believe the church is a reflection of that."

Mack now believes that the Catholic church has stamped out sexual abuse with a zero tolerance policy but said he thinks its "much more prevalent" in society at large than people imagine.

At 11, he was more credulous. One spring afternoon, Mack was banging away on a church piano after mass when the priest molested him under the ruse of "helping to make a costume for a church play."

Both Mack and the priest left that small North Carolina town soon after that.

The story is a familiar one to Thorp, who has been a social worker reaching out to victims of clergy abuse since 2002 when the position was first created.

"It begins, as sadly many of these do, with a little boy... In a single moment that trust is betrayed and violated," Thorp said. She said she appreciated the story of Mack's own spiritual resurgence when he came back to the church after so many years. She was convinced of the play's merits after going to see it at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre. Though the play obviously delves into dark material, Mack leavens it with humor and ends it on an uplifting note.

"I think the closest we can come to truth is simply telling our story," said Mack. "I really do believe in the power of personal narrative."

Cambridge Chronicle

America's oldest weekly, since 1846

An amazing journey of forgiveness

By Richard Griffin

Cambridge Chronicle: April 8, 2012

Cambridge — Michael Mack is a man of many credits as a writer and theatrical performer. Now age 55, he has also accomplished two things in the spiritual realm that rank as unique in my experience.

First, despite suffering sexual abuse as a boy at the hands of a Catholic priest, he is now an active member of the church and values its spirituality. All the other victims of clergy abuse I have known have distanced themselves from this faith community, most with continuing and understandable anger.

Michael's second achievement strikes me as even more remarkable. He has forgiven the priest who violated him.

In a long interview with Michael, I found his account of both events fascinating. The violation took place when he was 11 years old, the forgiveness when he had reached middle age.

Incidentally, the reason for our being in touch was a scheduled performance of Michael's one-person play "Conversations with My Molester – a Journey of Faith." It was to be staged at the playwright's parish, St. Paul's in Cambridge.

Just before sending this column off, I actually saw the play along with an unexpectedly large audience. We found it spellbinding. Adding to the meaning of the occasion, an official of the Archdiocese of Boston responsible for overseeing child protection, Barbara Thorp, was present and took part in the discussion at the end.

The sexual violation of the boy Michael took place in Brevard, North Carolina, a small town in the western part of the state. Because their mother was ill, he and his siblings spent a year living with their aunt and her family there, rather than back home in Washington D.C.

The boy loved his parish church in North Carolina and envisioned himself becoming a priest someday. He soon became close to the pastor, the person who took Michael to his first basketball game, and acted toward him like a "surrogate dad."

One day, the boy wandered into the church basement and sat down to play the piano. Then the priest appeared and invited Michael to come to the rectory. Once in this house, the priest brought the boy into a room, closed the door, and took advantage of the child's innocence.

Days later, the priest left the parish and Michael, too, moved from Brevard soon afterward. "I left that day confused," he recalls. "I felt that something big had just happened — something not right."

Later, as a teenager, he was to experience something much worse, what he calls "self-loathing."

As to the priest who assaulted him sexually, Michael lost complete contact with him for decades. But when he moved to Boston some 10 years ago, Michael made an astounding discovery.

The priest was also living in Massachusetts, not too far away in the orbit of Worcester. Though not defrocked, he was no longer performing priestly ministry.

Michael's repeated efforts to reach the priest were ultimately connected with a spiritual change in Michael's heart. He had been moved to forgive the priest for what he had done.

As I listened to Michael's story, I felt moved by his sincerity and his spiritual courage. He had managed to offer forgiveness to someone who, behind the full force of priestly status, had done him terrible harm.

Michael tells of going to the priest's funeral. It was his first time in many years back in a Catholic church. There the man who had violated him and others was extolled as a good priest. Despite his forgiveness, Michael found it bizarre to hear his molester praised.

However, Michael does suggest the spiritual complexity of it all. "Nothing is ever completely forgiven," he says. "I see it as a life-long journey."

Michael Mack turns to stage after molestation

By Steve Annear
Boston Metro: January 4, 2012

Cambridge resident Michael Mack's dream to become a priest fell apart quickly after pastor molested him at age 11 in his North Carolina-based hometown.

Decades later, Mack is facing his past demons and delivering an onstage performance that maps his journey from darkness and confusion to rekindling his religious beliefs in his play titled "Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith."

The play opens next week.

"Storytelling is something deeply human and an important way for people to come to healing and connect with the community," said Mack, a seasoned poet and MIT alumnus.

Before Mack completed the play, he tracked down the clergy member who molested him following the massive unveiling of the sex-abuse scandal within the Archdiocese of Boston.

"I had been imagining all my life having this conversation with him and having Boston be the epicenter of the scandal certainly brought it to my consciousness," he said.

Mack discovered the priest was living in Worcester in 2005 and decided to confront him. What happened from there eventually led to a spiritual revival for Mack.

Coinciding with the 10-year anniversary of the Globe's publication of records documenting the church sex-abuse scandal, Mack plans on inviting clergy members to see the performance.

"In a way, this is my sermon," he said.

Sidebar: A letter of sorrow

Yesterday, Cardinal Sean O'Malley issued a letter to the community, marking the 10-year anniversary of the sex-abuse scandal and apologized for the "horrendous crimes" that devastated the lives of many. "As a church, we must continue to express the depth of our sorrow ... for how badly we failed those entrusted in our care," O'Malley said.



Journey Of Faith Retold In ‘Conversations With My Molester’

By [MEGHNA CHAKRABARTI](#)
Jan 11, 2012, 3:30 PM

We decided to end Wednesday’s show with a story. It’s a true one. And it’s about a man named **Michael Mack**.

Michael lives in Boston now. He looks like he’s in early middle-age, with a wirey body, long curly hair tucked behind his ears, and an intense gaze. He’s the kind of man who, when he was a child, knew exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up.

“I wanted to be a priest. I remember being 10 or 11 years old, just walking down the street, talking to God. It was just the most natural thing in the world for me.”

But Michael didn’t grow up to be a priest. No. He joined the Air Force. And then, became a writer and actor. His new play: “Conversations with my Molester: A Faith Journey” revisits a painful time in his childhood where he was molested by his parish priest in North Carolina.

We spoke with Mack about the play, his writing process, and the story of his renewed love for his Catholic faith.



Poet, performer, and playwright Michael Mack.
(Courtesy: Michael Mack)



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Dear Michael Mack,

I wanted to thank you very much for premiering your new performance piece, "Conversations with My Molester" at our Healing the Generations: A Family Violence and Child Trauma Conference. We are honored to have been your first venue for the piece and know your performance will be received beautifully all over the country (and the world).

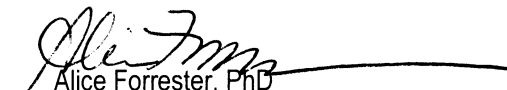
As you know we had over 430 professionals in the field of child mental health attend the conference, and we were thrilled to see that over 100 people attended your workshop on Thursday. I was just reviewing the conference satisfaction surveys; although we had over 50 presentations, your piece was the one mentioned the most as making an outstanding contribution to our conference by the attendees.

I can't agree more-- your piece was both moving and eerily prescient of the recent headlines about the sexual abuse scandal reaching the doors of the Vatican. Having seen your other performance "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)" I was expecting a thoughtful self revelatory performance piece, but I could not prepare for the personal impact your story made on me and others in the audience. You are an extraordinary artist, portraying the inner life of a young boy, filled with joy and light, dreaming of being a priest and a pilot-- and his struggle, once molested, with coming to terms with his thoughts about his abuser and what happened.

It is so critical that victims of sexual abuse talk about their experiences, as we have so little words to describe the events and so little understanding of what it takes for a person to come to terms with the abuse. Your piece described the love and care you held the priest who molested you as well as shared your outrage at the multiple revelations of abuse being uncovered. Although you tell your own personal journey, you appear to tell the journey of hundreds of boys and girls....and I know your piece will bring understanding and empathy to all who see it.

Michael, you are an extraordinary poet and performance artist, and I hope that we will have the opportunity to work together again very soon. Please feel free to share this letter with others, and I would be honored to speak to anyone about the piece, and to give my unfettered support for thousands to have the opportunity to see "Conversations with My Molester."

With much gratitude,


Alice Forrester, PhD
Executive Director



June 17, 2011

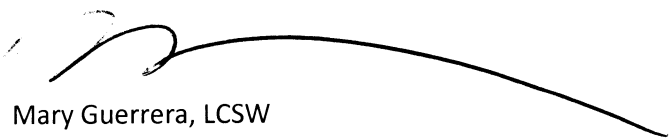
Dear Michael:

On behalf of the Young Adult Services Work Group of the Coordinated Services Network, CT Mental Health Center, I would like to thank you for a powerful and thought provoking presentation on June 8. "Conversations With My Molester" is a riveting play about a very sensitive and risky topic. I commend your courage and your honesty.

Feedback from those in attendance has been overwhelmingly positive. As professionals, we have so much to learn from the personal stories of people like you. Your first person account of how the trauma of being sexually assaulted as a young boy forces us to deal with our own discomfort on the subject and to think about how best to engage our clients around these issues. We do not necessarily learn these things in the safe world of undergraduate and graduate school.

Good luck with the play. I think you will find there are audiences on college campuses and in mental health organizations throughout the country who will be interested in seeing it.

Sincerely,


Mary Guerrero, LCSW
Executive Director

*Hope to have you
back next year!*