

Wayside Cross resident fighting eviction with help from advocacy group and his church

By DENISE CROSBY | AURORA BEACON-NEWS | JUL 09, 2019 | 3:33 PM

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Illinois Voices for Reform Executive Director Will Mingus, left, talks to Wayside Cross resident and staff member Marcus Sabo after a recent press conference held by Aurora clergy who are opposed to the evictions of Sabo and 18 other child sex offenders from Wayside. (Denise Crosby / The Beacon-News)

There are dozens of stories now unfolding at Wayside Cross Ministries in Aurora as the controversy surrounding some of its residents continues to make headlines locally and throughout the Chicago area.

That certainly includes the 19 convicted child sex offenders who last week were told they had until the end of the month to find new places to live or face the possibility of a return to prison. That's because McCarty Park, once an embarrassing eyesore in downtown Aurora, is now considered a playground by the city, which puts the 92-year-old mission that is dedicated to helping ex-cons and addicts regain a foothold, in violation of a state law making it illegal for child sex offenders to be within 500 feet of schools, playgrounds and daycare facilities.

Perhaps the most compelling storyline involves the one registered child sex offender who refused to sign the paper acknowledging this order to move from his job and his home of more than four years.

Marcus Sabo, who is not only a resident but a trusted employee at Wayside, took that defiance a step further by contacting Illinois Voices for Reform, a nonprofit organization that is on a mission to change what some regard as the state's overly-harsh laws regarding sex offenders.

The group, in turn, got attorneys to represent the 19 men and fired off a letter to the police chief challenging the idea McCarty Park is a playground, while also alluding to future legal action.

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Sabo knew

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 take this fight. A couple years ago he testified several times before a task force looking at ways to change state sex offender laws critics insist have gone far beyond the original intent of protecting children, and instead infringe on the constitutional rights of the offenders.

They also argue these laws can do more harm than good by making it impossible for sex offenders, once they've served time, to get their lives back on track because of the residency restrictions placed upon them. Which is in large part why Wayside Cross has been such a haven for this particularly loathed group of offenders. And it's one of the criticisms the city is running into from residents who argue it is far better to allow these men to live and work within a program that has a 92-year-old track record of turning lives around than to turn them out into the community with no stable housing, support or supervision.



Marcus Sabo visits with Diana Nelson, accounts manager at Wayside Cross Ministries, after a press conference last week that was held by pastors from local churches who are opposed to the city's plans to evict 19 child sex offenders from the mission. (Denise Crosby / The Beacon-News)

Sabo insists Wayside not only changed his life, but saved it.

After spending a year in prison for possession of child pornography, the former Crystal Lake youth baseball coach said he found himself homeless and despondent with no place to turn. And so he took a bottle of sleeping pills "deep into a city park" in McHenry late on a freezing February evening. Then he prayed to "a God I did not believe in" to "just take me because I did not want to live."

Sabo told me he swallowed the pills and lay down, "thinking I would never wake up." But hours later, "by some miracle," he sat up – which brought him into the sight-line of a police officer "about 75 yards away" who told him he was about ready to give up the search after

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 about a man sleeping in the park.

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After being transported to a hospital, Sabo spent a few more days in a mental health facility as officials tried to figure out where he could go. Sabo said he mentioned "a place in Aurora" that takes child sex offenders he'd heard about in prison ... and so it was he found himself a resident of Wayside Cross.

Sabo was in the mission's program for six months when his failed suicide attempt came back to haunt him, he said. He was charged with two felony counts of failing to register as a sex offender and misdemeanor sexual predator in a public park, according to documents filed in McHenry County court.

Fortunately, Sabo said, he had a "mentor from Wayside who believed in me," and "a very sensible judge" who instead of sending him back to jail or giving him probation, issued a "convict and cl

Screenshot

 ved him to return to the Aurora program where, according to his lawyer's account in a Tribune story, he was "flourishing."

So much so that in 2017 Wayside hired him as the resident coordinator of its Master's Touch program, where he works with pre-screenings and intakes, as well as with mentors and teachers.

Sabo also joined First Presbyterian Church of Aurora in May of 2016 where, according to the Rev. Jeff Moore, he is a member in good standing and well respected.

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"We can never know the inner workings of any human heart, but we can know what we observe," said the senior pastor. "And we do know some of them pretty well ... men who have submitted themselves voluntarily to live in a community where they must be held accountable to rules and guidelines."

These men, he added, "also know the law better than we do," and avoid any situation where they can be around children, well aware that even being falsely accused could send them back to prison for a long time.

They "self-regulate," Moore said, "keeping their heads down and giving their lives to redemption ... all they want is to be left alone."

The pastor said after he brought up the controversy on Sunday, more than 40 people stayed after the service to talk about ways they can offer support, not just to four of the 19 affected men "who are our brothers, our friends, our members" of First Presbyterian, but to Wayside overall.

"As long as we've been around, we have been a partner with Wayside, and we've seen the lives that have been changed at the mission ... including a four-generation family who have risen to become leading, serving members of Aurora and beyond," Moore said.

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"Wayside has been a solution in this city for nine decades. Now suddenly, they are the problem?"

Moore and other church supporters signed up to speak at Tuesday's Aurora City Council meeting, but also plan to offer more concrete ways of support to "help these guys move forward."

With assurances by his church he will at the very least have a temporary roof over his head if he must leave Wayside July 25, Sabo admitted he's "resting easier." And he's grateful for the support that the 19 men and Wayside have received from the faith-based community.

But Sabo still plans to fight the eviction "as long as I can legally."

"Marcus is an amazingly intelligent person who is thoughtful in his mannerism and in the way he thinks through issues," said Moore. "God has positioned him to be a huge advocate" for change.

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