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Boy Scout Leader, Priest Accused of Sex Abuse

By Charles Miller and Patrick Lakamp
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A Boy Scout leader was charged with sexual abuse and a priest was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after a teen-age boy told police he was abused by the pair.

Syracuse police accused scout leader Robert G. Prior, 67, of 1510 Stolp Ave. of fondling the boy last month in Syracuse. Prior is a school bus driver for the Westhill Central School District.

The boy also told police he was fondled by the Rev. Donald C. Hebert, formerly of Most Holy Rosary Church, during an overnight stay at a camp a week later.

The boy and his mother said they did not press charges against Hebert because he apologized to them.

As a result of the incidents, the boy is being treated by a psychologist, the mother said. The psychologist declined to comment. Officials from the Catholic Diocese of Syracuse did not return phone calls today.

According to the 1989 directory of the Diocese of Syracuse, Hebert was coordinator for religious activities for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts throughout the diocese.

Hebert is being treated at St. Luke's Institute, a Catholic psychiatric hospital in Suitland, Md. When contacted today by telephone, he said he was unaware he had been named in the boy's police statement made Wednesday. Hebert added that he did not know Prior had been charged.

"The whole thing is tragic. I hope everything works out for Mr. Prior and the child," Hebert said. "I'm here trying to work out my problems. I'm really sorry."

The victim's mother said her son wanted to press charges until Hebert apologized. When the diocese told the family Hebert was going to be treated, the boy changed his mind, she said.

"He'll have to live with this for the rest of his life," the mother said today. "All I know is Father Don is going to be away for a long time. I don't hate him, but I hate what he did. If this happened to any other boys, I hope they come forward like we did."

Prior is accused of pulling the boy into a car by the shirt, rubbing his stomach and fondling his genitals from the outside of his pants.

Prior, an assistant scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop No. 87 and its former scoutmaster, denied the boy's charge.

He told police he has touched several boys over the years, and admitted another sexual contact with the teen-ager.

In a sworn statement, he told police he touched the boy's genitals during a scouting trip in 1989 at Lourdes Camp on Skaneateles Lake. In his statement, Prior said he had become sexually aroused at the time.

"It was a 'You show me, I show you' type of thing," Prior said in a telephone interview today. "I don't feel there's any sexual harassment. It's blown out of proportion. It's ruining my reputation."

Before the 1989 incident, Prior said, he had had no sexual contact with boys for 12 years.

"I thought I had taken care of my problem until that night with (the boy)," Prior told police.

He said today his problem is under control: "I don't have a problem anymore. I don't have a problem with boys."

Until today, Prior drove a bus for the Westhill School District. School officials suspended him this morning indefinitely. Prior said he would be resigning from scouting.

"How can I not leave scouting? How can I drive a bus full of children?" he said. "You can't have someone charged with sexual abuse involved with those things. That hurts me because I love what I do."

Prior said the boy asked him to touch his genital area.

"He perpetuated the whole thing," Prior said. "I was a little gullible. I admit I made a mistake. Be that as it may, I did not abuse the boy. It was a touch, but it was no abuse."

Prior is a retired building and grounds superintendent at Bishop Ludden High School. He has been involved with the Boy Scout troop for 27 years. He served as the troop's scoutmaster for 18 years.

"I've done a lot of positive things with scouting," he said.

HE FACES charges of third-degree sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child, both misdemeanors. The endangering charge, the more serious of the two, carries a maximum penalty of one year in jail.

Police gave an appearance ticket to Prior, ordering him to appear next Thursday in City Court. He is free on his own recognizance.

"This is just a minor misdemeanor charge," Prior said. "It's really not what it's cracked up to be. I don't want my name in the paper. I got a life to lead. It's hurting me, and it's hurting my family."

Prior is married and has four children and nine grandchildren, who he said "are standing behind me all the way."

Prior was arrested after the boy told his doctor about the incident he said occurred in Syracuse last month.

Police interviewed the boy at his school. In a statement, the boy described what happened.

"Mr. Prior was sitting in the car in the driver's seat," the statement said. "Mr. Prior said come here and he grabbed me by my . . . shirt. It was just before the State Fair started. He pulled me over to his car. He started rubbing my stomach and said he could do a lot better things than Father Don could do. Mr. Prior started rubbing my penis with his hand on the outside of my pants for a minute. I got mad, I was going to hit him but I didn't. Mr. Prior is big and strong. I jerked myself away from him and borrowed a kid's bike and went home."

THE BOY said he did not tell his mother everything that happened, but he later told his counselor.

Both the boy and Prior told an officer assigned to the Syracuse Police Department's child abuse unit of the incident at the camp.

In his version to police, Prior said the youth had first asked to sleep with him.

The boy told police he also was abused by the priest.

"I also was touched by Father Don about two weeks ago," he said in his statement. "It was a week after Mr. Prior touched me. . . . Father Don is from Rosary Church. Father Don called me on the phone and told me he was going up to his camp in Parish, N.Y., to get some stuff because it got broke into. I asked Father Don if I could go. He said I could go but I had to ask my mother, who said yes.

"Father Don picked me up Saturday at 8:30 a.m. in the morning. . . . It was near the end of August 1990. When we got to the camp, we played with the other kids. Later on in the night, when I went to sleep, Father Don put his cot next to mine. At about 12 (midnight) Father Don reached under the covers and rubbed my penis. I told him to stop, and he did. He asked if it felt good, and I told him no."

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