

A respected Maine deputy, or a predator of minors? - The Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

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2016 Cop Pedophile Kenneth L. Hatch III

An examination of the case against Lincoln County's Kenneth L. Hatch III paints a picture of a committed lawman facing troubling allegations in recent years.

WHITEFIELD — He was Deputy of the Year and a celebrated member of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department, with a wife, two sons and a good reputation among his neighbors.

But Kenneth L. Hatch III may have also been living a double life.

On and off for the last 16 years, prosecutors allege, Hatch preyed on teenage girls, all the while moving through the ranks of law enforcement in central Maine.

An indictment handed up in August accused Hatch, 46, of 22 felonies, including 11 counts of sexual abuse of a minor, eight counts of aggravated furnishing of marijuana to a minor, and two counts of unlawful sexual contact. In many of the incidents, Hatch was on duty when the alleged abuse occurred.

Although interviews with Hatch's neighbors and a public version of his personnel records released by his employer largely paint a picture of a committed law enforcement officer, Hatch was reprimanded twice and demoted from his position as a detective sergeant around the same time the Maine Criminal Justice Academy board of trustees and the Attorney General's Office were investigating allegations against him.

The sheriff of Lincoln County, Hatch's supervisor for much of that time, would not directly answer questions about the accusations against Hatch, saying he was bound by law not to.

One of the alleged victims who spoke with the Maine Sunday Telegram said Hatch used his power as a police officer to sexually abuse her over a period of years. She was afraid to speak up, she said, because it would be her word against his.

"He's a cop," she said. "Who's going to believe me?"

Finally in June, she spoke up and told a family member, triggering the investigation and Hatch's arrest.

The Maine Sunday Telegram is not naming her because it does not identify victims of alleged sexual abuse without their consent.

Her fear of speaking out is common among victims of police sexual violence. For every victim

who comes forward to accuse an officer, five more remain silent, said Philip M. Stinson, a professor of criminal justice at Bowling Green State University and a leading researcher on police misconduct.

“There’s something about that power dynamic,” Stinson said. “Police officers are used to being in charge, of telling people what to do, and of people obeying them – or there are consequences.”

Hatch, who makes his next appearance in Superior Court in Rockland in February, did not answer the door when a reporter twice visited his home in Whitefield and no working number for him could be located.

His attorney, Richard Elliot, said Hatch will fight every charge, and is preparing to take the case to trial.

In a brief interview, Elliot said the alleged victims all know one another and have motive to ruin Hatch’s life and reputation. He said one of the victims is close to a man whom Hatch investigated during his long career in law enforcement.

“Obviously I can’t tell you everything I’ve got at this point, but I can tell you there will be some very interesting contradictory witnesses that will be very close to this case,” Elliot said.

THE PATH TO PROMOTIONS

Before he was a deputy, Kenneth L. Hatch III was a U.S. Marine.

Although the exact timeline of his enlistment and deployment was not included in his personnel files made available by Lincoln County Sheriff Todd Brackett, Hatch seemed to have left active duty and become a reservist by 1990, when he was hired by the Kennebec County Sheriff’s Office as a corrections officer.

Hatch was deployed during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in early 1991 as an assistant gunner in the 1st Battalion, 25th Marines, but had returned to Maine by November, according to a letter of appreciation from Hatch’s commanding officer at the Marine Reserve Training Center in Topsham.

He remained in corrections at what is now Two Bridges Regional Jail until 1995, when he was hired by Kennebec County as a dispatcher, according to personnel records.

The move allowed him to also become a part-time patrol deputy in the transport division, his first foray as a sworn officer. That same year, Hatch was awarded the Unsung Deputy award, for the unglamorous work he did to improve the department’s transportation division.

By 1997, Hatch was employed by the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office as a patrol deputy. It was a homecoming for Hatch, whose family has owned property off Pittston Road in Whitefield for at least two generations, according to a neighbor. His next promotion came in 2002, when Hatch

was made patrol sergeant.

“It is obvious that one of the important assets that Deputy Hatch will provide, will be his ability to lead by example,” Sheriff William C. Carter wrote in his promotion letter dated Aug. 6, 2002.

Only three months later, Hatch was promoted again to the Criminal Investigations Division as a detective sergeant. By 2005, his personnel file was thick with letters of commendation and gratitude, totaling 16 in all.

He would go on to be named Lincoln County Deputy of the Year for 2015, a year in which Hatch performed admirably after accepting a demotion from sergeant back to patrol deputy. That year, he and another officer saved the life of a man intent on killing himself by cutting his own hand off with a power saw.

“The deputies rendered emergency first aid to include applying a tourniquet while struggling with the man, who did not want to be treated,” Brackett said during an April 2015 recognition ceremony, described by the Lincoln County News. “(Hatch’s) compassion, skills, and professionalism are a testament to (his) commitment to the people of Lincoln County and the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office,” Brackett said.

A ‘VERY SERIOUS’ INCIDENT

Hatch’s personnel record remained unblemished until 2010, when he received his first written reprimand.

On Feb. 10 that year, Hatch was found to have used his position as a police officer to run a driver’s record search and criminal history background check for his brother-in-law, Roland Dyer, who was applying to become a taxi driver in Augusta.

The documents Hatch provided to Dyer were marked “law enforcement purposes only,” but Dyer attached them to his taxi application to the city, triggering the complaint. In running the records checks, Hatch indicated the purpose was for criminal investigation.

When he was confronted with the violation, Hatch lied, saying the criminal case number he attached to the request was a mistake, before he eventually admitted to misusing the databases.

“I want to stress to you that I find this incident very serious in nature,” wrote Lt. Michael Murphy. “Any repeat of this type of conduct could lead to further disciplinary action, up to and including termination.”

The second reprimand came two years later, in 2012.

Then a detective sergeant and a supervisor for the Criminal Investigations Division, Hatch was responsible for holding the keys to the evidence room.

When oxycodone pills went missing from evidence in 2011, leading to the dismissal of two drug trafficking cases, the sheriff commissioned an outside investigation. It was determined that instead of keeping the evidence keys on his person as he had been directed, Hatch had left the key in his unlocked desk drawer, according to a copy of the 2012 reprimand letter.

After that incident, Hatch agreed to a reassignment of duties and a demotion from criminal investigations back to patrol, according to a 2012 agreement provided by the sheriff's office.

In August that same year, another, separate allegation against Hatch was referred to the Maine Criminal Justice Academy Board, which examines whether officers accused of crimes or serious misconduct should have their state law enforcement license revoked or suspended.

According to records provided by the academy, Hatch was accused of unlawful sexual touching, a misdemeanor. Three months later in November, the disciplinary case was closed because the complaint against Hatch was dismissed.

It's not clear whether the dismissal was because of a lack of evidence, because the allegation was false, or some other circumstance. State law prevents the academy from releasing all but the barest of records showing only the final result of a disciplinary process, not how or why the board made its decision.

Another personnel record provided by Brackett's office indicates a concurrent investigation by the Attorney General's Office, although that document does not describe the nature of the allegations that triggered the investigation, and Brackett said he is forbidden by law from discussing it. That investigation also did not result in charges, meaning any documents or information generated by the AG's investigator are not considered a public record and are shielded by law from public release.

Brackett said he is bound by law not to disclose certain protected personnel information, such as allegations against an employee that do not result in charges.

When first asked in early October whether Hatch had been accused of making unwanted sexual advances in the past, Brackett said that if such a record existed, he could not comment on it, nor confirm or deny its existence.

"I'd like to be able to share as much as I could with you. I'm not trying to cover anything up," Brackett said. "This is painful enough as it is. I can tell you that I have never once since I've been sheriff ignored any complaint about any personnel that's come into me. Some of them are unfounded, some of them aren't. That's really important in the integrity of the services that we're providing to our public."

Several weeks later, when told that Hatch's name had been referred to the Criminal Justice Academy board in 2012 on an accusation of unlawful sexual touching, Brackett said those allegations were unfounded, and that Hatch had been exonerated.

He declined to comment on whether the attorney general's investigation, which also did not result in charges, stemmed from that accusation of unlawful sexual touching.

When asked directly if he was aware of any previous allegations of unwanted sexual advances by Hatch, Brackett said only that if there were, he could not comment on them because they are considered private personnel records, and not subject to public records law.

ELUSIVE DATA

Criminal misconduct by police has always been difficult to study, due in large part to a lack of data. Unlike crimes committed by ordinary citizens, which are tracked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, offenses by police are not tabulated by any federal agency.

In the absence of national data, researchers have tried to quantify and analyze police misconduct by looking at single departments or narrow case studies.

In Maine between 2011 and August 2016, 266 police officers or corrections officers were referred for discipline by the Criminal Justice Academy board for alleged criminal acts. Of those cases, 27 were for sexual misconduct, and 20 of those resulted in revocation, suspension or other penalties against the officer's certificate.

Only in recent years, with the proliferation of digital news databases, have researchers been able to look back in the public record to compile information on the frequency and severity of crimes by police on a national scale.

Stinson, of Bowling Green State University, is at the forefront of this research. A former police officer and attorney, Stinson and his research partners have built a database of police officer arrests dating back to 2005 using Google News alerts, which in turn lead to court documents and other records that yield more information on the crimes.

Stinson is quick to acknowledge that his research is limited only to cases that are reported by news agencies, and that only a minuscule fraction of the roughly 900,000 non-federal police officers employed nationwide will ever offend criminally.

Yet in the four-year period he examined between 2005 and 2008, Stinson identified 771 cases involving the arrest of 555 sworn officers for sex-related crimes in 44 states and the District of Columbia.

The study found that roughly three out of four victims of police sexual violence were younger than 18 years old, and a little more than half of the cases – 52 percent – involved officers who were on duty at the time of the alleged crime.

“More often we see the 14- and 15-year-olds who are sexually coerced, sexually manipulated,” Stinson said in an interview. “In all these kinds of cases, starting with the more stereotypical violent sex assault at a traffic stop, we usually see it in a one-to-five ratio: For every one that is

reported in the media or substantiated, there's five more that are unreported.”

Predatory police officers are unusually terrifying for victims, Stinson said. Police are respected members of the community, so their words carry weight. They carry guns, often even when they're off duty. They know where the domestic violence shelters are, so it may be more difficult to get away. They have access to special databases and can easily learn where a victim lives or what their criminal history may be. And police officers often have contact with poor people, victims of other crimes, people with criminal records and criminal suspects – all of whom are more vulnerable to coercion by a figure in authority.

“It's very threatening to a victim,” Stinson said. “Who do you call when it's the police that has criminally victimized you?”

A HELPFUL NEIGHBOR

All the while, Hatch's neighbors knew him as courteous and outgoing.

Eileen Barter, a neighbor who lives near Hatch on Pittston Road, recalled how Hatch, his wife and one of his sons rushed to her family's aid on what was perhaps the worst day of her life.

On a cold night in November 2015, Cory Barter, Eileen's son, was overdue to return home from work, and it was a wet, foggy evening. She hoped her 32-year-old son had taken it slow on the two-lane road that connects the town of Wiscasset where he worked to the sleepy stretch of Pittston Road in Whitefield where the Barters have lived now for a dozen years.

But then she saw two police officers coming toward her door – the sirens were for her son, they confirmed. He had been killed in a wreck.

Although Hatch was off duty, he was at her home almost immediately.

“I don't even know how he knew,” said Barter, 62. “He said, ‘Oh my God, I'm so sorry.’ He and his son and his wife came up and stayed with us until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning.”

It wasn't the first time he went out of his way to help. During storms, Hatch would check on his neighbors to make sure they were warm and safe. He shoveled snow for the Barters multiple times, she said.

Barter doesn't know what to make of the allegations against Hatch, and hopes they aren't true.

Another neighbor was also in disbelief, and recalled Hatch as outgoing and playful.

Beth Gregoire said Hatch, in his cruiser, would sometimes “pull over” Gregoire with lights and sirens – not for any infraction, but just to say hello.

Whenever Gregoire's husband, who has severe health problems, would require an ambulance

ride or emergency service, Hatch always came by to check on her.

“I’d be crying and he’d hold me,” said Gregoire. “I can’t say anything derogatory because it hasn’t affected me personally and I don’t believe the story.”

‘HE ACTED LIKE A PERVERT’

One of Hatch’s accusers, whom the Sunday Telegram is not naming because she is the victim of an alleged sex crime, said Hatch groomed her from when she was a child, grabbing her by the breast and buttocks, and putting his hands in her pants.

When she was a teenager, Hatch allowed her to do what her parents wouldn’t. He bought her alcohol and cigarettes and gave her marijuana, she said. Hatch worked the night shift, and she would accompany him some nights, riding in his cruiser.

When he pulled over a car and confiscated weed, she said, Hatch would sometimes give it to her instead of bagging it up as evidence. On occasion, she even smoked it in his cruiser, although he always declined to take a toke.

The woman, who was between 14 and 16 years old when most of the alleged abuse occurred and is now an adult, said when Hatch wasn’t working, he was likely drinking, always the same mix of Bacardi Limon and Diet Pepsi. Sometimes he would drink before duty, but most often afterward, she said.

When he drank, he would make more aggressive advances toward her, she said.

“He acted like a pervert,” the alleged victim said. “But he always acted like that. It just got worse when he drank.”

As she and Hatch grew closer, she would spend more time with him, often while he was on duty.

That’s when the most serious sexual advances began, she told investigators. Hatch asked her for sex many times, and she told him no.

Then one time, when she was about 14, Hatch offered her marijuana while she was in his cruiser, in exchange for sex. She agreed.

They parked on a remote section of Crocker Avenue in Whitefield. She got into the back seat, and Hatch removed his gun belt and uniform.

After they were done, the woman said she threw up in her mouth thinking about what had just happened. Hatch gave her a baggie of marijuana.

Giving her the drugs became Hatch’s way of getting her to do what he wanted, she said. Hatch always told her not to grow up and think of him as a disgusting old man.

Hatch is alleged to have assaulted her mostly while he was on duty, but also, on one occasion, at her home.

She suspected he also assaulted her at his hunting camp in Bradford, where Hatch gave her alcohol and marijuana and she passed out. When she woke up, she was not wearing any pants or underwear.

For years she remained silent out of fear, embarrassment and the daunting prospect of the scrutiny involved in bringing the case to court.

“I don’t understand how I could have let it happen more than just that once,” the alleged victim said. “I wish I wasn’t so scared to tell somebody.”

Now she hopes to see him pay for what he did to her.

“I want him to be in jail for the rest of his life,” she said. “I want him to sit there and rot.”

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