

## Child Pornography Charges Against Police Chief Roil a Town in Westchester

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VALHALLA, N.Y. — Betrayed. That was the word some parishioners used to describe how they felt about the arrest of a longtime member of their congregation who happened to be the police chief of Mount Pleasant.

In October, Brian Fanelli, then a police lieutenant, taught children in religious classes at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Shrub Oak, N.Y., in northern Westchester County, how to be alert to sexual abuse. Speaking to the children, some of whom were first graders, he covered topics like inappropriate touching — they should not let anyone touch them in the “bathing suit area,” he told them. According to a church letter, he also discussed “the pitfalls of social media devices, games and computer applications.”

Mr. Fanelli, 54, was appointed police chief in November.

On the morning of Jan. 23, agents of the United States Department of Homeland Security raided his home in Mahopac, N.Y., and seized two computers that they later said contained 120 files from the Internet of photographs and videos of children as young as 7 having various forms of sex with adults or with other children.

Mr. Fanelli was charged in federal court in White Plains by prosecutors with the office of the United States attorney, Preet Bharara, with possession of child pornography, which carries a maximum prison sentence of 10 years and a \$250,000 fine. He was released on a \$50,000 unsecured bond that day.

The criminal complaint against Mr. Fanelli says that he told arresting agents that he had begun viewing child pornography a year ago “as research for the classes he was teaching” and shortly thereafter “for personal interest.”

He has been suspended, with pay.

Mr. Fanelli is at least the third New York area police official to be forced from his job in recent months. Thomas V. Dale, the Nassau County police commissioner, resigned in December after the county district attorney accused him of ordering the arrest of a man over a small unpaid fine for political reasons. And Joseph Krzeminski, Port Chester’s police chief of 18 years, had to retire in January after Mr. Bharara accused him of witness tampering in an inquiry over the

disappearance of \$26,000 from an evidence room.

At a hearing the day of his arrest, Mr. Fanelli did not register a plea. His lawyer, Susanne Brody, said in an email that she would have no comment. The Journal News reported that Mr. Fanelli had been admitted to Putnam Hospital Center the night of his arrest after he was reported to be despondent and suicidal. The hospital said on Thursday that it did not have a patient of that name. The Carmel Police Department would only confirm that the police went to Mr. Fanelli's home that night after receiving a call from there.

Many who knew or encountered Chief Fanelli were dismayed at the charges and the upset ran particularly deep at his church, where he had been a fifth-grade catechism teacher for at least the past six years, though he has now been dismissed.

"I felt very betrayed," said Alyssa Monteleone, a 48-year-old teacher from Yorktown Heights, who attended one of Mr. Fanelli's sex abuse classes with her 7-year-old son Frank. "He stands right up there and teaches, and he was doing it himself."

The town of Mount Pleasant, whose seat at Valhalla is about 20 miles south of Shrub Oak and Mahopac, is a sprawling, largely middle-class and affluent suburban town of 43,724 people that embraces the hamlets of Valhalla, Hawthorne and Thornwood and the villages of Pleasantville and Sleepy Hollow, and a portion of the village of Briarcliff Manor. The three villages have their own police departments, and the Mount Pleasant police cover the remaining territory of 28 square miles.

Rob Astorino, the county executive of Westchester, who lives in Mount Pleasant and had been on the town board, said in an email that Mr. Fanelli "has long been a respected community figure, and this reminds us all how cautious we and our children have to be in this day and age."

Mr. Fanelli, who graduated from Valhalla High School and has a bachelor's degree in police science from Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, had been with the department for more than 30 years. Joan Maybury, the town supervisor, appointed him chief, a job overseeing the 39-officer department that came with a salary of \$135,518. Paul J. Oliva, a lieutenant with the force since 1988, was named Tuesday as acting chief.

Ms. Maybury said the entire Police Department had been shaken. "This came out of the blue," she said. "There was no prior indication from his performance that would have indicated such behavior."

Mr. Fanelli had been known as the department's computer maven and chief technology troubleshooter, straightening out problems in-house as well as in the computers officers have in their cars. He and his wife, Sonja, a school nurse, have two grown children. The family lives in a ranch-style house on a road of modest middle-class homes. One former town official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to publicly comment on someone he knows, said Mr. Fanelli was "reserved but with a good sense of humor and a friendly guy, very

professional and easy to work with.”

The complaint said that Mr. Fanelli used a peer-to-peer-file sharing program, which lets users swap music, photos and videos with relative anonymity. Investigators, using special law enforcement software, were able to trace some files to the IP address on one of the Fanelli home’s three computers.

Last Sunday, some 100 parents attended a meeting at the church with parish and representatives from the Archdiocese of New York. Sara Koshofer, the director of religious education, said the next day that the parents had “put it behind them.”

Ms. Monteleone had not done that exactly, but one thing, she said, pleased her.

“I’m happy he got arrested before he had a chance to act on it,” she said.