

POLITICO

CONGRESS

Hastert hometown rocked by scandal

In Yorkville, Ill., shock and disbelief over allegations against a beloved teacher and coach.

By **JAKE SHERMAN** and **HILLARY FLYNN** | 5/29/15 8:09 PM EDT



Dennis Hastert (left) and Illinois State University wrestling coach Larry Meyer are pictured in this 1975 photo, taken from a newspaper page. | AP Photo

YORKVILLE, Ill. – Larry Patrick remembers J. Dennis Hastert well. He remembers wrestling on his 1976 championship team here in this rural community of 17,000, west of Chicago. He remembers the summers, when Hastert would pile his wrestlers into a bus, and drive it himself so the Yorkville High School team could afford to attend camp.

“They would really make these trips inexpensive,” Patrick said. “Just Denny driving the bus with about 10 boys.” Patrick – like many others here – vehemently denied that Hastert had any inappropriate relationships. Carl Kick, who wrestled in 1979,

said the same: Hastert never behaved inappropriately.

But the news that Hastert — the long-serving former House speaker and home-town hero — was under indictment for allegedly concealing his agreement to pay \$3.5 million in hush money to a would-be accuser hit his friends and neighbors hard. And news reports now appear to confirm their worst fears: that the funds went to a man leveling accusations of sexual abuse during Hastert's days as a teacher and coach.

Robert Corwin, Hastert's longtime friend and a local judo instructor, was surprised Hastert was in trouble at all. He and Hastert took kids on a "super activity every summer." They went to the Grand Canyon twice, and the Bahamas seven times. In the Bahamas, they stayed in a "very primitive" cabin, so they pair didn't have to worry about the teenagers getting into any trouble. Most of the kids had never been farther than Yorkville or slightly larger Illinois cities like Springfield or Champaign, Corwin said.

"As far as I know, none of the kids [Denny coached] ever got in trouble," said Corwin, whose judo studio is next to the train tracks running through this town. "Denny was like a mentor to them in high school. If a kid started to go astray, Denny would have a talk with that kid and straighten him out."

When he heard of the indictment, he said the allegations of wrongdoing by Hastert "surprised" him.

"I had no idea," Corwin said.

Yorkville and Washington have always represented the two poles in Hastert's life.



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JAKE SHERMAN and JOHN BRESNAHAN

In Yorkville — a once sleepy former pioneer village that only recently tripled in size, thanks partly to an expanding Wrigley plant making Skittles — Hastert was the teacher and champion wrestling coach, who led a Boy Scout troop and an Explorer Post group for nearly two decades. Moving seamlessly into politics, he became Yorkville's man in Springfield and later in Washington.

In the nation's capital, Hastert was known as the man who rose to the speakership rapidly and unexpectedly – and then held onto it for longer than anyone else in the Republican Party's history. At the peak of his power, he was flanked by Capitol Police, and had a phalanx of aides always by his side. On 9/11, he was the man whisked from the Capitol to Andrews Air Force Base to an awaiting helicopter, which took him to an undisclosed location to shield him from a potential terrorist attack. When Hastert was ushered out of power, he vowed to leave Washington to come back to Yorkville and wind down from his time in D.C.

But Washington and Yorkville were joined in shock this week, as news of the indictment spread. Hastert, now 73 will likely be arraigned next week in federal court Chicago on felony charges that could land him in jail for as many as 10 years. U.S. District Court Judge Thomas M. Durkin, a Chicago native appointed to the bench by President Barack Obama, has been assigned to the case.



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The celebrity status Hastert once enjoyed in both Yorkville and Washington is quickly falling away. Nearby Wheaton College accepted Hastert's resignation from the board of advisers of the eponymous J. Dennis Hastert Center for Economics, Government, and Public Policy. The Yorkville school district that employed Hastert for 16 years said they had "no knowledge" of Hastert's "alleged misconduct."

"If requested to do so, the district plans to cooperate fully with the U.S. Attorney's investigation into this matter," school officials said in a release.

Meanwhile, the Washington-based law firm and lobbying group of Dickstein Shapiro, where Hastert worked for many years, accepted his resignation, as well.

The current House speaker, John Boehner (R-Ohio), recalled Hastert fondly but didn't comment on the allegations: "The Denny I served with worked hard on behalf of his constituents and the country. I'm shocked and saddened to learn of these reports."

Hastert was nowhere to be seen Friday. Local Chicago television trucks lined the narrow Creek Road in Plano, Illinois — just a few miles from Yorkville — with

cameras trained on Hastert's green house. Hastert's neighborhood was the picture of serenity, reflecting nothing of the public storm enveloping this town and Hastert's legacy.

Paddle boards were strewn around a pond in front of Hastert's home. Across from Hastert's house is a quiet field. The only upheaval of the day came when county officials tried to move reporters from the side of the road for a lawn mowing.