Alleged hacker in massive credit card scam honed skills at early age

August 20 2009, By Nirvi Shah

Years before his arrest in the nation's largest credit card heist, Albert Gonzalez launched a bold plan from a computer in his high school library: hack into the government network of India.

By the time FBI agents descended on South Miami Senior High School, the quiet 17-year-old senior had already shattered the security systems and left his mark: offensive notes on government message boards.

The successful breach of a network across the world stunned school administrators, but showed Gonzalez was already demonstrating the skills that would define him as one of the most prolific hackers in United States history.

Now charged with stealing more than 130 million credit card numbers in a sweeping fraud case, the Miami native escaped punishment a decade ago when he tapped into Indian servers using two computers in his high school library.

"All of a sudden the FBI was at the school, and they want two of the computers in the library," recounted South Miami High principal Thomas L. Shaw. "This was really malicious stuff."

For Gonzalez, 28, the intrusion represented the beginning of a hacking career that prosecutors say would eventually touch the lives of millions of consumers across the country.

He has been charged three times since last year for masterminding massive schemes to steal credit and debit data from some of the nation's largest retailers and credit card processers. Now known as the king of identity thieves, Gonzalez began dabbling with computers innocently as a young boy growing up in a working class neighborhood of Miami-Dade, say those who remember him.

At 8 years old, his parents, Maria and Alberto, bought him his first computer just as the Internet was maturing, and by the time he was 9, he was already figuring out how to remove viruses, said his attorney and longtime family friend Rene Palomino Jr.

"He didn't go out and play football with his friends," Palomino said. "He was always in front of his computer. His best friend was his computer."

During elementary school he grew increasingly fascinated with the intricacies of computers -- and honing the skills that would serve him for the next two decades.

While immersing himself in the developing technology of the 1990s, Gonzalez was spending much of his time alone, say several classmates.

"He would be the type of guy that people don't really notice in class. The quiet, reserved and to himself person," said Cynthia Barberena, 27. "He was actually a very average guy. He wasn't popular. He was very quiet, very into his little group of friends."

Palomino said he first met Gonzalez when the youngster was serving as an altar boy at Principe de Paz, where his parents and older sister, Frances, also attended church.

But Gonzalez's growing interest in computers and the Internet began to alarm his parents, Palomino said. "After putting him to sleep, at one or

two in the morning, his mother would find him still on the computer," he said.

By the time he attended [high school](), he began taking computer classes, but he was far ahead of his classmates.

In his final year, he and two other students took their skills too far when they connected to the school's library computer -- masking their location -- and then managed to crack the computer network of the government of India.

"It was kid stuff," Palomino said. "It was just leaving ridiculous messages regarding their culture."

But Shaw said it was far from a prank. "The FBI came to the school, asking for our computers -- two of them -- in the library," he said. "We never had anything like this happen at the school.

"What I remember is that they had to cancel checks over there because of what happened."

Palomino said Gonzalez wasn't charged with a crime at the time. "They just told him, 'Stay away from your computer for six months.'"

By 1999, he had graduated near the top of his class and later moved to the New York area, where he met in Internet chat rooms the people who would eventually become his co-defendants.

By 2003, he was using the screen name 'soupnazi' -- shuttling between South Florida and New York while carrying out what prosecutors would call systematic break-ins on [computer]() systems up and down the East Coast through 2007, according to federal indictments.

On Monday, he broke records when he and two other unnamed defendants were indicted in a massive scheme to steal the credit cards of 130 million Americans -- the largest ever reported.

Palomino, who just returned from visiting Gonzalez in a New York jail, said the accused hacker is "very remorseful as to what has happened. He's put himself in a very tough situation. He feels sorry for what he has done."

For those who remember Gonzalez in earlier years, the public image of a serial offender comes as a surprise.

"I was amazed," said Barberena, Gonzalez's classmate. "He was the kid that never got in trouble."

___

(c) 2009, The Miami Herald.
Visit The Miami Herald Web edition on the World Wide Web at
www.miamiherald.com/
Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.