

Hacking suspect a 'genius,' but often in trouble

March 9 2012, By Todd Lighty and Stacy St. Clair

At the time of his latest arrest, Jeremy Hammond was living on Chicago's South Side, about three dozen miles and an entire political spectrum away from the conservative Illinois community in which he grew up.

Already a rock-star to anarchists and cyber-terrorists worldwide, Hammond was one of five [computer hackers](#) charged Tuesday with crimes related to high-profile [cyber attacks](#) against major corporations and government entities. Court documents tie Hammond to "Anonymous," a decentralized international collective of "[hacktivists](#)," or people who use computer networks for [political protests](#) and other actions.

His mother, Rose Collins, offered a heavy sigh when informed that the FBI had arrested her 27-year-old son.

"Again?" she asked. "I love my son, but he is a genius with no brain. He has a 168 IQ, but he has no wisdom."

Hammond is Collins' firstborn, just a few minutes older than his twin brother, Jason. From birth, the boys' father believed they could be geniuses and went to great lengths to stoke their intelligence, Collins said. In addition to reading to them constantly, he played a recording of multiplication tables on a continuous loop while they slept in their cribs, she said.

At age 8, Hammond was designing simple, Pong-like games on a home computer. By 11, he could code his own databases. When Collins once took the young twins' Nintendo away as a punishment for misbehaving, she caught them a few hours later trying to build their own game console.

The boys' parents, who never married, broke up before the twins started kindergarten, Collins said. Though they saw their mother on alternate weekends, the twins lived primarily with their father, Jack, a musician who encouraged them to speak out against perceived injustices.

As a student at Glenbard East High School, Hammond refused to study and still brought home stellar grades, his mother said. He soon grew bored with school and Glendale Heights, Ill. - a bedroom community in right-leaning DuPage County - and began channeling his restlessness into pranks and social protests.

While still a student, he hacked into the high school's mainframe computer to show administrators its weaknesses, and was thanked for calling attention to the gaps, according to his mother. She said Hammond did the same thing at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and was kicked out.

A UI-Chicago spokesman confirmed that Hammond, a computer science major, left the school in spring 2004. He would not comment on disciplinary issues, citing federal privacy laws.

By many accounts, the punishment left Hammond bitter, transforming him from a helpful hacker into a self-proclaimed cyber-vigilante determined to use his talents to attack powerful companies and organizations. A year after leaving college, he was arrested for hacking into a website called Protest Warrior, a conservative group best known for organizing counter-protests in support of the Iraq War. He was

sentenced to two years in prison.

"Whoever said it's a blessing to have a gifted child obviously doesn't know what they are talking about," Collins said. "It can break your heart."

Hammond remained in custody Tuesday and will be transferred at a later date to New York, where the federal hacking investigation was based. After his court appearance, Hammond seemed curious about the charges against him, asking deputy marshals if he could keep a copy of the criminal complaint outlining the case.

Federal prosecutors charged Hammond with three felony counts related to computer hacking, including conspiracy and fraud. They allege Hammond in December 2011 broke into the computer network of Strategic Forecasting Inc., or Stratfor, a global intelligence firm in Austin, Texas.

Authorities allege Hammond and unidentified co-conspirators defaced Stratfor's website, deleted information and stole confidential data, including employees' emails, "as well as personally identifying information and credit card data for Stratfor's clients; (and) publicly disclosed at least some of that data by dumping it on certain Internet websites."

Federal authorities say Hammond and others stole the personal information of about 60,000 credit card users and then charged at least \$700,000 on the cards.

Records state that on Dec. 29, days after the Stratfor hacking, a message was posted on a file-sharing website that encouraged people to use the stolen credit card information.

"We call upon all allied battleships, all armies from darkness, to use and abuse these password lists and credit card information to wreak unholy havoc upon the systems and personal email accounts of these rich and powerful oppressors," the message read, according to court documents.

Court records state Hammond was involved in militant, left-leaning activities and anarchist groups. For years, he has been a "freegan," someone who eats food that has been thrown in dumpsters and elsewhere as "part of the anti-consumerist movement."

Hammond told friends he wanted to use Stratfor's stolen credit card information to make donations to liberal organizations, although he had not done so.

"Hammond himself stated in an interview with the FBI that he intended to use hacking to fight for social justice," according to court records.

Agents believe the Stratfor hack affected about 860,000 of Stratfor's subscribers and clients, which included various U.S. government entities, foreign law enforcement agencies and private individuals.

"Stratfor applauds the hard work of the law enforcement organizations involved in the investigation," the company said in a statement. "As the matter now moves through the judicial system, we will stay focused on working to recover from the episode."

Court records show Hammond has been arrested more than a dozen times since turning 18, with charges ranging from possession of marijuana and disorderly conduct to computer hacking and felony mob action.

His attorney from the Protest Warrior's case described Hammond as "really, really bright" and committed to using hacking to further his

political views.

"He has this gift, this ability with computers," defense lawyer Matt McQuaid said. "He was young and had this power. It's like a baby holding a bazooka. He just couldn't control it."

Hammond's most recent conviction came in 2010, when he and his twin brother both received probation for burning an Olympic banner in Daley Plaza as the city was vying for the 2016 games.

In a letter to the court asking for leniency, the boys' father described them as conscientious men who work hard and volunteer in their community. At the time, Jeremy Hammond was employed as a website designer and helped out at Food Not Bombs, which provides meals to the poor.

"I am very proud of my kids, their social consciousness, their work ethic and their leadership qualities," Jack Hammond wrote.

Their mother, a tea party activist who now lives in Texas, said her sons ignore her when she suggests they find more respectful ways to protest.

"I told them that when the tea party protests something, we clean up after ourselves and thank the police. But they don't listen," Collins said. "I'm not a genius, so in their view I couldn't possibly be right."

Hammond's political activism began in high school, when he persuaded about 100 other students to walk out of Glenbard East in protest of the Iraq War. He also was involved in a campus group that ran an underground newspaper and provided vegetarian meals for anti-war protesters in the Chicago area.

He was arrested in 2009 for violently protesting and disrupting a meeting

of Holocaust deniers in the north suburbs, court records show.

Hammond and his brother are members of Dirty Surgeon Insurgency, a Chicago ska punk band whose playlist includes songs titled "Cockroaches in Heat" and "Church of the Cockroach Enema." They often perform charity concerts to help raise money and awareness for various community groups, records show.

"I'm proud that my son stands up for his beliefs," Collins said. "He has a good heart, and he wants to help people who are oppressed. I just wish he would find a better way of doing that."

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