Former youth camp counsellor charged with child porn offences

A former counsellor at a youth camp owned and operated by the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton has been charged with possession and distribution of child pornography.

Tanner Porteous, 19, of Sherwood Park was a volunteer interim programmer from July 29 to Aug. 3 this summer at Camp Encounter, near Lac La Nonne about 100 kilometres northwest of Edmonton.

Porteous was a camp counsellor in the summer of 2017 and a member of the fall program staff from Sept. 5 to Oct. 13, 2017. He was also a camper himself for six seasons prior to joining the staff.

In January 2018, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children provided RCMP with information about a Sherwood Park suspect accessing child pornography.

RCMP say Porteous was arrested on Sept. 6 after a search of his family's home in Sherwood Park following an investigation by Strathcona County RCMP and ALERT's Internet Child Exploitation unit.

Porteous is charged with one count of possession, and one count of distributing child pornography online.

RCMP say the investigation and charges are related strictly to online offences. He has been released with conditions, and is scheduled to appear in court in Sherwood Park on Sept. 19.

The Archdiocese of Edmonton is "shocked and disheartened" by the charges, said Lorraine Turchansky, the archdiocese's chief communications officer.

"Our abuse prevention protocols are pretty rigorous, but that doesn't mean abuses won't occur," Turchansky said.

"One thing that has become obvious with the recent coverage of church sex abuse scandals in the U.S. is that we have to be transparent and we have to be accountable. And one way we can demonstrate that is to make this kind of information public, as we have done today."

Turchansky did note that "there is no indication that the alleged offences were connected to his service at Camp Encounter, and he had no access to any camp computers. However, given the seriousness of this charge, the accused will no longer be considered for any volunteer or employment role in the Archdiocese."

Camp Encounter, one of two Archdiocesan camps, caters to eight to 18-year-olds. It can accommodate about 50 to 55 children per week. In 2016, 324 campers attended Camp Encounter. Trained volunteers act as junior counsellors, aged 16 to 18, or counsellors in training, aged 14 to 15 each week.

Turchansky said all volunteers and staff — including those at Camp Encounter — are required to undergo background checks, give signed agreement to a code of conduct, and complete an abuse prevention training program.

Last year, the Archdiocese received accreditation from Praesidium, an international abuse prevention consultancy, for achieving the highest standards in abuse prevention. Turchansky noted that a part of that process requires the Archdiocese to conduct regular safety audits of parishes and institutions and work continually to improve its practices.

Turchansky noted that Porteous had a clear criminal record and child intervention check. He also signed a behaviour standards document as all counsellors are required to do.

At Camp Encounter, Porteous' duties included supervising campers on the buses to and from camps, inspecting dorms, preparing activities for campers and assisting other counsellors.

"In light of this charge, we will be working with police and other experts to expand our understanding of this kind of offence and if necessary strengthen our protocols," she said.

Turchansky said the Archdiocese has offered its full cooperation to the RCMP, and encourages anyone with relevant information to contact police.

The RCMP Internet Child Exploitation unit is encouraging anyone with information about this case to come forward and contact the Strathcona County RCMP or cybertip.ca.

Camp Encounter and its sister camp, Our Lady of Victory at Gull Lake, near Red Deer, will not be running as of October. The Archdiocese is reviewing their viability in the future.

This story will be updated as more information becomes available.