

Teens Warned of Exploitive Photo Website

By Justin Mason She found out about AnonIB in the worst way a teenage girl could: via a text message from someone who saw her nude pictures posted on the website. The girl, then a Mohonasen High School senior, was overcome with shame and embarrassment, anger and betrayal. The images she had taken of herself were intended only for the eyes of her longtime boyfriend, not an audience that extended to the farthest reaches of the Internet. She alerted the school district and Rotterdam police. She also left comments on the site, trying to convey her disgust over the images she found there of herself and other classmates. "It was a very stressful time," recalled the girl, now 19, whose name is being withheld by The Gazette. "I was embarrassed to walk through the halls at school." Eventually, her pictures were removed after the site was contacted by authorities. But she was one of the lucky ones. AnonIB is an Internet image board site, where people can anonymously post images for anyone to view. Some image board sites are designed to be funny or focus on a certain theme or social issue. Others post nude or sexually explicit images without the consent or knowledge of the person in the images, sometimes identified by first name and an initial — or even a full last name. Often the photos are of underage girls. Some of those teens who have discovered their photos on AnonIB found it's tough to get the site to remove their photos, including another former Mohonasen student who spoke to Rotterdam police in June. Investigators asked the site to remove all pictures of the 19-year-old girl — ones she had taken of herself when she was still in high school — only to have their request ignored. "We're not getting any cooperation from the site at all," said Lt. Michael Brown. Little Recourse

And there appears to be little recourse for investigators to force the site to cooperate. The site's domain name is registered through a proxy service in China and uses a distributed system of servers overseas — a complex network for authorities to navigate even to find where the unwanted content is hosted. Even the legality of AnonIB's content falls in a gray area of the law. Although some of the images featured there are clearly of high school-age females, they're often taken by the girls themselves and don't display a sexual act that crosses the legal threshold of child pornography in New York. "Morally indefensible, but not criminally chargeable," said Schenectady County District Attorney Robert Carney. The site has prompted an online petition signed by more than 6,000 people, urging the FBI to shut it down for good. Many who signed the petition indicated they've been exploited or cyber-stalked once their images were posted; some said they were blackmailed by AnonIB visitors who were able to track down their identity. "After deleting my material [on AnonIB], people are still hunting my material down," wrote one woman who signed the petition last month. "Feels as though they're hunting me down. And we're not just talking about nude pics either, clothed women are also targeted. No woman is safe on this website." Founded in 2006 and short for Anonymous Image Board, AnonIB hosts hundreds of thousands of images of young women, cataloged by the state or country where they live. The site also includes subcategories devoted to more specific geographic areas: counties, towns and even high schools — including Mohonasen and several other districts around the Capital Region. Shenendehowa has a forum, as does Galway and Saratoga Springs. One forum caters to posters sharing images from high schools in Fulton and Montgomery counties, while another boast pictures of girls from "518" — the area code for the Capital Region north to the Canadian border. Images generally range from

girls who are partially nude to poses that are far more explicit. The site boasts the veil of anonymity for its posters, which emboldens them to post pictures of underage girls. Stolen by Hackers

There's no way of telling exactly how each picture came to the site, but some posters unapologetically claim to be jilted boyfriends uploading them as a parting jab at their ex. Others purportedly come from hackers claiming to have grabbed pictures after cracking into email accounts or social networking sites such as Facebook. "I just get into their email, then proceed to move onto their Facebook," boasted one anonymous poster in the Mohonasen thread. Rules on the site are fairly succinct: no underage pornography or nudity, no pictures of children, no posting of personal information and no trading. Yet these rules are evidently left to loose interpretation by the administrators. The site does detail how girls can have their pictures taken down, though the process involves rigorous steps to prove their identity. One method involves submitting a dated picture of themselves to the site before the offending image will be removed. Posters on AnonIB revel in the images they use to fuel the site. Some even request photos of specific girls they want to see naked; a poster who fills the request is credited with a "win" — something that amounts to bragging rights amid the salacious chatter of nameless AnonIB visitors. The experience is understandably different for girls who unwittingly appear on the site. For them, the images represent a feeling of exploitation and a broken trust. "I'm hurt that someone I trusted sent these pictures out," said the former Mohonasen student who had her images removed from the site. "Even though he said he didn't, I don't know how else the pictures would get around." The difficulties in getting photos removed from the Web has prompted Rotterdam police to make an appeal to young teenagers to stop sending salacious photos of themselves to others. Brown said parents and educators alike should be warning their children about sites like AnonIB and how a picture intended for one person can easily end up circulating among millions. "What we're really trying to do is to help people talk to their kids about not sending these types of pictures to anyone," he said. Lesson Learned

For girls like the 19-year-old from Mohonasen, AnonIB represents a lesson learned the hard way. Though she's moved on with her life, the ordeal she went through with the site has left her with a shameful memory. "I just hope that people learn from this and then hopefully by some miracle something can be done about the website," she said. Attempts to contact AnonIB via the site's abuse email address went unanswered, and there's no information on any other way to contact site administrators. But posters parrot the general philosophy of the site, which is that if young girls are willing enough to take explicit photos of themselves, they should be prepared for them to be circulated throughout the Internet. "No one told you to send nude photos of yourself," stated one poster on the Mohonasen forum after another blasted AnonIB for posting her pictures. "I mean think about the logic there. 'Oh. I'm going to send my 6-month boyfriend nudie pics of myself because ...' why exactly?" Carol Stenger, coordinator for health promotion at the University at Albany, says part of the answer to that question lies in the fact that prepubescent teens are turning to the Internet for their sex education, which almost inevitably leads them to pornography. On average, Stenger said children are 11 when they view pornography for the first time. These images mesh with others from pop culture — scantily-clad singers and actresses — to set a standard with young girls. "The women that seem to get attention and are very popular are very sexualized," she said. "An adolescent sees that and says 'I want to be admired and I want to be attractive.' If someone wants to see erotic photos of them, they're showing them without much thought." Circulated Worldwide

And that photo can easily end up in the wrong hands and circulated worldwide. There's little security when it comes to sharing explicit photos of yourself, said David Fallon, a special agent in the FBI's Albany office. Fallon said his office receives several complaints each month about AnonIB, and, in cases where the complainant has unwanted pictures posted on the site, the agency tries to get the offending images removed. But even when the pictures are

taken down, he said there's no guarantee they haven't been downloaded by others and won't reappear on similar sites. "The bottom line is, don't take pictures of yourself if you don't want them on the Internet," he said. "Because once that picture is out there, its never coming back." Even getting a site like AnonIB to comply with requests to remove offensive photos is tricky if the administrators don't comply, said Michael Macomber, a civil attorney for the Albany law firm of Tully Rinckey. He said the first and greatest hurdle to clear would be to find out exactly who to file a lawsuit against. With AnonIB and its servers hosted outside the United States, the site itself would be difficult to sue. And the anonymity it grants the people who post pictures to the site likely means they don't carry logs of who uploads them. "Even if you tracked down someone and got them on the phone, it's possible the [log] information doesn't even exist," he said.