Former Scout leader sentenced to 100 years for sexual assault

By Jerry Shnay

Thomas Hacker, the former Burbank Boy Scout leader convicted of sexually attacking one of his charges, was sentenced Wednesday to 100 years in prison by a judge who said society must be protected from people like Hacker.

"The kind of damage done to young people [by Hacker] is mind-boggling," said Judge Lester McCurrie before giving the 53-year-old defendant two consecutive 50-year prison terms.

"There is a responsibility to protect society from people like this."

The sentencing, in the Bridgeview branch of Cook County Circuit Court, was watched by a crowd that included several Boy Scouts, their families and friends. It came a month after Hacker had been convicted on two counts of aggravated criminal sexual assault against an 11-year-old boy in 1986 and again in 1987.

Trial testimony, including that of defense witnesses, indicated that Hacker had molested dozens of boys over a number of years.

Hacker will probably never get out of prison. He must serve a minimum of 25 years on each sentence before becoming eligible for parole in 2039, when he would be 103 years old.

Assistant State's Atty. James McCarter, who prosecuted the case with Robert Parchem, had asked McCurrie for an extended term sentence of 60 years on each of the two convictions.

But defense attorney Elliot Price argued that such a harsh sentence would be a death sentence. "You might as well give him a lethal injection right now," said Price, adding that he doubted that his client could survive two years behind bars.

In alluding to reports that inmates prey on those convicted of sex crimes, Price said: "The inmates will probably kill him. Sex offenders are ultimately at the bottom of the penitentiary system. . . . A sentence such as suggested is the end of his life."

That did not convince McCurrie, and neither did an apparently contrite Hacker, who said in a quavering voice that he accepted "responsibility for the damage I have caused. No one can undo the damage to society, the young men, their family, my family. Only God can repair the damage, and I pray every day."

When McCurrie pronounced sentence, Hacker showed no emotion.

McCarter said Hacker had "taken the innocent things, the dreams . . . and turned them into a nightmare. He took away the dignity and innocence of youth, and all we can take away is time."

Referring to one witness who said Hacker may have molested more than 100 boys over the years, McCurrie said, "I hope those 100-plus young men recover from this."

Afterward, McCarter praised the four youths who testified, including the victim, who said Hacker performed sexual acts on him during overnight camping trips in December, 1986, and again in the summer of 1987.

"It wasn't easy for them to come in and expose the damage done to their person and to their dignity," he said. "Without kids like this, Hacker wouldn't have gotten 100 years."

Hacker, who was the director of the Burbank Park District for eight years, had been active in various youth activities in the Burbank-Oak Lawn area for years. It was not known there that he had been convicted of sex offenses in Indianapolis in 1970 and Mt. Prospect in 1971.

The facade he had gradually built up through the years began to crumble in late 1987 when Burbank police began investigating the theft of $575 from the Burbank Park District safe. Suspicions were aroused when Hacker asked police not to conduct background checks on employees.

He was arrested on Feb. 10, 1988, after the parents of the victim suspected their son had been molested.