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In Sandusky's Birthplace, the Man They Knew

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WASHINGTON, Pa. — The Brownson House, the old red-brick recreation center on Jefferson Avenue, was like a hearth the whole community huddled around. Every child played there, one generation after another, bouncing a basketball on an undersize court that had an inconvenient pillar in the middle.

From 1952 to 1985, Art and Evie Sandusky ran the place — the sewing classes, boxing matches, table tennis and all the rest — and it's fair to say they were widely admired. The couple lived in a small apartment at the top of the building, and they had one child, whose name was Jerry.

Art Sandusky, a great athlete, was a local legend, but Jerry Sandusky became well known across the country — praised as a defensive mastermind for [Penn State](#)'s football team; celebrated as a humanitarian who started a charity for troubled youth; and, as of last week, reviled as an accused child molester in a scandal that brought down Joe Paterno and rendered chaos at this state's flagship university.

"I grew up playing ball with Jerry, a nice guy, a really good guy, and when I see this on the news it's just unbelievable," said Bill Lindsay, 68. "You know, he's an absolute look-alike for his dad, and it's hard to imagine anyone from that family being a pervert. But it's also hard to doubt all we've been hearing. Old Art is rolling over in the grave."

If there are answers to the enigmatic puzzle that is Jerry Sandusky, they lie well beneath the surface here in his birthplace, far more difficult to get at than the mineral-rich sedimentary rock that runs under the Western Pennsylvania soil.

People in Washington, a blue-collar town of 14,000 about 30 miles south of Pittsburgh, are even more confused than others about the ugly allegations, the reported abuse of at least eight boys across 15 years. They have the added question to face: how well does anyone really know anyone else?

"For us, his best friends, this is pretty close to what everybody felt after J.F.K.'s assassination, a big hole in your stomach," said Ben Lucas, who made Sandusky the best

man at his wedding. “People’s first thought must be that this man’s a monster. But that’s not so. He is such a good person.”

And yet even though Sandusky denies the charges, Lucas has been convinced otherwise by the 23-page grand jury report that portrays Sandusky as a predator, a cunning man adept at using his charity — the Second Mile — to find boys to sexually assault. He bought them clothing and sports equipment, the report said. He took them to the Penn State campus, to a golf resort, to a bowl game.

“As we were growing up, Jerry was an icon,” said Lucas, 68, who is now a retiree in Virginia. “If there had been an election in Washington, Pa., Jerry would have been voted the outstanding guy in the neighborhood. And it didn’t stop there. Look at all he accomplished in his life.”

But figuring out who might become a sex offender is not easy. “People tend to think that sex offenders have a trench coat and three-day stubble and look kind of creepy,” said Thomas G. Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University and an expert on sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests. “Sex offenders come in all shapes and sizes and colors and I.Q.’s.”

He added: “Some offenders are in remarkable denial. They say they were doing the child a favor because he was being neglected at home. Others will say that what they did is not so bad. They’ll minimize it, and when you break through the denial, they’re often devastated and suicidal.”

In fact, according to the grand jury report, detectives say they overheard Sandusky tell the mother of Victim No. 6, “I wish I were dead,” after she confronted him about improperly hugging her son in the showers.

Dr. David Finkelhor, the director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said no one knew where any type of sexual predilection comes from; some people contain their sexual fantasies, others act them out.

The indictment against Sandusky lays out a familiar pattern of “grooming” victims, Finkelhor said. “These were vulnerable kids, and you can see the kind of guile and opportunism used,” he said. “A big factor can be incentives offered, special attention and privileges, taking the kids to certain activities and places they wouldn’t ordinarily have access. These kids may have complied with him because of a need to keep the relationship.”

Jerry Sandusky, 67, is the author of an autobiography called “Touched,” published in 2000, or about six years after the first crime outlined in the indictment. The title is intended as a thank-you to the great people who had touched his life. It is tempting to search the book for clues.

In one reflective passage, he wrote: “There were perils I faced as a youngster. I did so because I thrived on testing the limits of others, and I enjoyed taking chances in danger.”

But these intriguing sentences are the introduction to a chapter about water balloon fights. Sandusky and several pals, including Lucas, were twice arrested for their overenthusiasm. Art Sandusky interceded, and the young men — already college students — were given a reprimand and a fine. “It made me glad,” Jerry wrote, that the community “thought of me as Art’s boy.”

Most people in Washington labored in steel mills, [coal](#) mines and glass factories. Evie Sandusky worked with glass; Art was a conductor for a trolley company. In the afternoons, home from work, they operated their own ice cream stand, which stayed open until 10 or 11 p.m.

They lived in a neighborhood called Tylerdale, named after the Tyler Tube and Pipe Co. When that business folded, its offices were bought by Judge James I. Brownson, who donated the building to a community group.

This became the Brownson House, which, though still open as a community center, nevertheless seems an artifact to a much earlier America. It was home to kindergarten classes, pool tournaments and dance classes. Boxers worked out in a makeshift ring in the stuffy basement. News clippings were pinned on a corkboard. A photograph from 1954 showed 10-year-old Jerry Sandusky kneeling like a mascot with the Brownson Golden Gloves team lined up behind him.

Art Sandusky was recruited to run the Brownson House because of his stature in the neighborhood. In his book, Jerry calls his father a “T-shirt executive,” a man who was the recreation center’s director, accountant, plumber, electrician and janitor. A sign in Art’s office read, “Don’t give up on a bad boy because he might turn out to be a great man.”

Youth football was played on what is now called Art Sandusky Field, boys as young as 8 learning what it means to block and tackle in a part of the country particularly obsessed with the game. Adults packed the bleachers most every night. Evie Sandusky sold them refreshments.

These days, most of the factories in Tylerdale are gone, though the neighborhood looks much the same. Narrow two-story houses, with porches out front and aluminum siding on the exteriors, sit on small patches of land. Osso's Pizzeria, the great hangout, still sells 140 pies a day. Men wearing Pittsburgh Steelers hats watch games at the members-only Slovak Club, the Pulaski Club or the Polish Club.

"Art Sandusky was a standup guy, and he idolized his son, taught him everything, even how to kick extra points," said Dick Cain, a 79-year-old bartender at the Pulaski Club. "Jerry was a bashful kid. He stayed away from the girls. He was more about sports, every sport."

Sandusky was not only a star high school football player; he was a high-scoring guard at basketball and a catcher on the baseball team. However successful at sports, he was not a big talker. Art taught him never to boast.

Jerry was indeed "shy and backward," as he put it, around girls. But he was smitten when he met Dottie Gross, his future wife, at a picnic in Washington. He was a senior at Penn State but still too timid to ask her out. So Evie invited the young woman to one of her son's softball games. "Maybe I just needed that one little push because one thing led to another, and before long, we had become closer," Sandusky wrote.

Kip Richeal used to be an equipment manager for Penn State's football team. He and Sandusky have been friends for three decades. Richeal ate meals at the Sandusky home in State College, sitting in the dining room at a big picnic table with pews for seats. The Sanduskys were unable to conceive on their own but they adopted six children, who are now adults.

"Jerry was fun to be around," said Richeal, 51, who lives in a suburb of Beaver Falls, about an hour north of here. "He was a big kid inside all the time, though he could be serious and tough when it came to coaching."

In 1991, Sandusky approached him about co-writing the autobiography. The coach had put some thoughts on paper and gave his friend the name of a possible publisher who turned out to be uninterested.

The project was resurrected in 1999, the year Sandusky retired from Penn State, ostensibly because he realized he would never become the head coach and wanted to spend more time with the Second Mile. He talked about his life into a microcassette recorder, mailing the tapes to Richeal, who molded the meandering thoughts into a 238-page book.

“I felt I knew Jerry, but this thing now is so off-the-wall abnormal, all I can say is, wow, unbelievable,” said Richeal, who now sells tombstones. “When I read the indictment, my stomach just kept churning, saying to myself, ‘Jerry, Jerry, Jerry.’ ”

He added: “I loved him as a friend but he never tried any of that stuff with me, never, never. And I never saw him do anything like that with any kids. No red flags.”

The book is not particularly introspective. But in the chapters about his childhood, Sandusky describes an epiphany. He mistakenly broke a headlight on the family car with a baseball bat, then fretted over whether to lie about it to his parents. He decided to confess, and instead of punishing him, Art praised his honesty and gave him a hug.

This incident, according to Jerry Sandusky, taught him to be courageous when confronted with adversity and always tell the truth.

Challenged to do just that in a telephone interview Monday on NBC, Sandusky responded to the charges this way: “Well, I could say that, you know, I have done some of those things. I have horsed around with kids. I have showered after workouts. I have hugged them and I have touched their leg. Without intent of sexual contact. But, so if you look at it that way, there are things that wouldn’t, you know, would be accurate.”

Richeal said the voice giving the rambling answers hardly sounded like Sandusky at all. He seemed “a beaten man,” Richeal said. He added that he had not heard Sandusky that downbeat in 25 years, since a loss to Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl.