



A teacher's hard lesson: 'Not guilty' is not enough

Fri, 2008-07-25 23:00 | Posted by: Bryan G Nelson in [Articles](#)

by Mike King - *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

He came to the profession late in life, at the age of 35, after years of working jobs that held no real meaning for him. When Gregory Leontovich began his career as a special education teacher in 1992, he found his calling. Three years into it, his peers at his first school named him teacher of the year.

"I loved teaching," Leontovich said. "I still love teaching, but I know I'll probably never be in the classroom again."

Not after what happened to him on Sept. 15, 2005 --- the day police escorted him away from Green Acres Elementary School in Smyrna, handcuffed him and spent hours trying to get him to confess to sodomizing a 6-year-old student in a girl's bathroom at the school.

"There must be a mistake," Leontovich said he kept telling himself while being interrogated. "They'll sort this out quickly."

On Monday, 2 1/2 years later, a Cobb County jury declared him not guilty of aggravated child molestation. Still, he knows there is a climate of suspicion connected to such allegations that even his acquittal doesn't clear away. So there's no guarantee that he'll ever be able to teach again.

Single, male and choosing to work around children later in life, Leontovich fits a cultural profile we hold in our heads about sexual offenders. It is a profile reinforced in recent years by hyperbolic media coverage of child abuse allegations involving teachers, coaches and Roman Catholic priests. It is fueled by reports about Internet predators and by prime-time shows where police and TV news reporters entrap would-be pedophiles and capture their arrests on camera.

"Innocent until proven guilty" may be a fine principle for bank robbers or even murderers. But not child molesters. In the toxic smoke of such an accusation, surely there must be some fire, or hint of fire.

Sometimes the evidence is scant, even nonexistent, yet people are wrongly accused. Teenagers fabricate stories about teachers they don't like. Parents accuse day care workers of abuse and satanic rituals, but only after psychologists help their kids recover repressed memories. In some cases, years go by and nothing is ever proven. Yet lives are ruined.

Leontovich's certainty that the misunderstanding about him would clear up quickly was short-lived. As he was about to be transferred to the Cobb County Jail, he was greeted by a representative of the personnel office of the Cobb County School District, "who told me I had the right to resign," he said. The implication was clear: If he didn't resign, he should expect to be fired. A few months later, he was.

He spent 26 days in jail. When his lawyer finally got before a judge to argue for bail, something extraordinary happened. About 70 of his colleagues from Green Acres and Hawthorne Elementary, where he had

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been teacher of the year in 1995, showed up in court to support him. In most child abuse cases involving teachers, colleagues put distance between themselves and the accused. Not this time.

Incredibly, teachers at the school were not interviewed by police until 10 or 11 weeks after the incident allegedly took place. When they were, their observations were uniform. Not Gregory Leontovich, they said. He was the last person they would suspect --- always careful around the kids, respectful of them, not one to put himself in any position that would cause suspicion.

None of the accuser's teachers noticed any signs of distress that day. In fact, she seemed happy and pleased with her schoolwork. During the trial last week, four of those teachers offered consistent testimony. The child's first-grade teacher testified that she never allowed students to go to the bathroom alone, not that day or any day. It couldn't have happened the way the child told police, she said.

The warrant for Leontovich's arrest was based on statements made by the child and her mother, plus a medical report that seemed consistent with the reported assault. It took a year to get an indictment on the charge and a year more to bring the case to trial.

In three days of testimony, the prosecution's case essentially fell apart. The medical findings turned out to be inconclusive. A videotape of the statement the child and her mother made to police conflicted with the testimony they provided on the stand.

Prosecutors presented a "similar transaction" witness --- another Green Acres student who claimed Leontovich molested her at school in 2004. But her story changed between the time she went to police in November of last year and her day on the stand last week. The most damaging testimony she offered at trial was that the teacher touched her on the shoulder.

It took the jury about four hours to conclude that Leontovich was not guilty. His friends and fellow teachers congratulated him Monday after he was acquitted. But Leontovich isn't really celebrating.

He hopes those same friends can help him convince the state licensing officials to let him stay a credentialed teacher, but he knows no personnel administrator or principal is likely to take a chance on him working directly with students.

"Maybe I can do some curriculum work or something," he said. Meanwhile, he does some part-time work as a law office temp and delivers pizza.

If we really believed in the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty, Gregory Leontovich would be in a classroom.

March 13, 2008

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In all honesty, this is why I must convince myself to continue

Wed, 2008-08-20 00:21 — Gerdofal

In all honesty, this kind of thing is why I must convince myself to return to the classroom after each summer break. My heart goes out to Leontovich. I wish there were something that could be done to make it up to him, but I know that is not possible.

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