

# Acquittal ends student's date rape ordeal

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A talented computer student who dropped out of university suffering from anxiety after being accused of raping a woman he met at a freshers' disco four years ago walked free from court yesterday when a jury rejected the charge against him.

Punching the air in celebration, Ashley Pittman, 22, said he felt as though his life was back on track after the nightmare he had lived through since the accusation was made.

According to the prosecution, the woman, then a biology undergraduate at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, was so traumatised by the alleged attack that she waited more than two years to contact the police.

But a jury of seven women and five men took 45 minutes to reach a unanimous verdict clearing Pittman of the charge following a three day trial at Swansea crown court.

Pittman's mother, a former policewoman, said the case against her son should never have been brought.

Speaking outside the court, she said: "The cost to Ashley cannot be calculated and there is no avenue of compensation open to him. All our lives have been on hold. It is so unfair."

The woman, who graduated from Aberystwyth last year, told the court that she met Pittman at a freshers' disco in September 1996 during their first week at the university. She said they kissed and cuddled on the dance floor and that Pittman had raped her after walking her back to her room in halls of residence.

The jury was told that because of the period that elapsed between the alleged attack and the allegation being made there was no forensic evidence to support the woman's complaint.

Pittman, who was on a work placement in Ireland when the woman made her complaint against him two years later, maintained throughout the trial that the encounter had never gone further than kissing and cuddling in a communal kitchen area and that no sex took place. He told the jury that the woman, then aged 18, had given him a kiss on the cheek when he left and that he had never seen her again.

Pittman, from Warminster, Wiltshire, took up his place at Aberystwyth after gaining five A levels. He was one of the top students on his course and was chosen by his department as an "ambassador" when the computer company Digital invited a student to work at its European software centre in Galway, Ireland. He became part of the team working on a new generation computer being developed by the company.

Digital was so impressed with his work that it extended his placement and promised to sponsor his final year at university to tempt him back after he completed his studies.

But the rape allegation brought Pittman's academic progress to a halt. He told the court he should have graduated two weeks ago but had failed to complete the course because of the pressure he had been under.

He said that while he was still working in Ireland he had received a telephone call from Aberystwyth police indicating they wanted to talk to him about lost property. But when he walked into the police station he found himself charged with rape and facing the possibility of a jail sentence.

Following his acquittal yesterday Pittman said he intended to "celebrate like mad".

He said the pressure had been unbelievable. "This all happened four years ago. I never saw her again after that night and did not give her another thought. This whole thing has been a nightmare. I had the world at my feet and, within minutes of walking into that police station, I was looking at jail instead."