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Former ISU student starts over after rape acquittal

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Former Illinois State University senior William Wells was acquitted of rape charges, but is now facing a difficult future as he attempts to finish his degree.

DAVID PROEBER, The Pantagraph

BLOOMINGTON — William Wells walked out of a McLean County courtroom on Aug. 12 a free man, acquitted by a jury of rape charges that could have sent him to prison for 65 years.

Now, he wants to know where he goes to reclaim the education, business and reputation he lost during 187 days he spent in jail waiting for his trial on charges that, while unproven, have left a stain on his record that he must try to erase.

"It was pretty hard to swallow and go through," Wells said in a recent interview.

"The damage to my character, my education, and my business is something that will be very hard to come back from," said Wells, who returned to his home in Chicago after the trial.

A jury ruled that prosecutors did not meet their burden to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Wells, a 24-year-old senior at Illinois State University, had sexually assaulted a woman he'd been dating for several months before the Feb. 7 incident.

In her testimony, the 18-year-old accuser admitted that Wells had irritated her several times that weekend, starting with his failure to pick her up at the Normal bus station when she arrived from the college she attends in northern Illinois.

She was further insulted, she said, when Wells criticized the cologne she gave him for a gift. And when Wells changed his plans the next evening and went to Champaign for a fraternity event, forcing her to stay with a friend on campus, she sent a text message to a friend complaining that Wells had "disrespected" her, according to evidence at the trial.

The woman became so upset with Wells during a car ride to her friend's dorm that she took a pink taser from her purse and pulled the trigger, striking Wells as he drove the car. Wells left her and her belongings on the curb.

Wells and the woman offered conflicting accounts to police of the sexual activity they engaged in before leaving the apartment. He claims it was consensual; she said it was rape. The woman told her friend she had been sexually assaulted by Wells, an accusation she repeated to Normal police who went to Wells' off-campus apartment looking for him, and evidence of a sex crime.

Wells has denied an NPD statement that an officer told him during a phone conversation that he should stay away from his apartment. Officers forced their way into the apartment after they saw Wells enter, and when he did not immediately come to the door.

Wells was taken to the Normal police station and questioned by a detective about his interaction with police at the apartment. Later in the interview, he was asked about a possible sexual assault, which he denied.

Last week, ISU officials told Wells the university would not reconsider its decision denying him to return to finish his final semester.

ISU Chief of Staff Jay Groves said he could not discuss specific student records, adding "the university's Student Code of Conduct process is much different from the court process and is confidential."

Dismissal from one university does not preclude a student from transferring to another school, said Groves. While another school may seek information about a transfer student as part of the admissions process, ISU does not include disciplinary information on a student's transcript, said Groves.

The jury convicted Wells of misdemeanor resisting arrest. A judge sentenced him to 30 days in jail, which he more than satisfied during his pre-trial stay. He also has an unrelated reckless driving and driving under the influence case pending.

Wells said he was unable to participate in an appeal of the ISU decision because he was incarcerated and was unaware of any provision of the code that allowed another person to appear on his behalf at a hearing. He plans to enroll in another college next semester.

False claims

The number of false rape claims filed each year in the U.S. is hard to come by because police use different methods to record such reports.

Researchers have concluded that between 2 and 10 percent of sex assault claims are unfounded because the allegations were false.

Wells' defense lawyer, Stephanie Wong, told jurors that Normal police lacked solid proof that a sex crime had occurred and took the woman's word without considering all the factors in the couple's relationship.

Normal Police Chief Rick Bleichner said the initial obstruction of justice charge against Wells related to his arrest. The sex assault charges were filed after the alleged victim, who was 17 at the time, was interviewed two days at the Children's Advocacy Center, said Bleichner.

When an acquittal is returned, "we come back and do a debrief" to review how the case was handled, said Bleichner.

McLean County State's Attorney declined to talk specifically about the Wells verdict, but he noted that prosecutors talk with alleged victims about the issues a jury may have with certain facts of a case, including a prior relationship.

Of larger consequence for victims is the knowledge that some convicted sex offenders may receive short sentences, said Chambers.

"We had one victim tell us they were reluctant to proceed because they perceived that even after a guilty verdict, they were just going to be free to continue the conduct anyway," said Chambers.

Guilty verdicts are a challenge in cases where the victim and accused assailant are acquainted, said Hilary Pacha, senior director of prevention and empowerment services at the YWCA.

"It's very easy to get up in arms over a stranger rape or a violent rape, but when it doesn't meet their vision or standard for what a rape looks like, such as an acquaintance rape, jurors have a hard time rendering a guilty verdict," said Pacha.

For Wells, school and mending the financial damage done when he was forced to close a shoe store he owned in Normal are his priorities.

"I'm blessed and happy to be out. I have to dust my hands off, keep my head up and move forward," he said.

Six months in jail gave Wells a chance to reflect on what led to the claims that jurors rejected.

"It makes sense. I didn't give her what she wanted emotionally. She was so mad she wanted to hurt me, put her hands on me. She was livid and wanted revenge. She really wanted to damage my life. I understand that, but at the end of the day, there was no rape," he said.

http://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/former-isu-student-starts-over-after-rape-acquittal/article_2bee3ac5-a8ff-5940-bd2d-e14ed194f09e.html