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News | Citrus

As coach gets sentence, teen pledges love

A Citrus student is denied permission to maintain contact with the former teacher, who receives house arrest in the sex case.

By DAWN REISS
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INVERNESS - She spoke softly, choking out the words.

"I love her," the 15-year-old girl told the judge. "And all I'm asking is to talk to her."

The Lecanto High School student spoke of Amy Lilley, 36, a former coach and teacher at her school with whom she had a sexual relationship.

The teenager's father supported the request.

"I don't believe she is a victim," he said of his daughter. "I believe that two people can fall in love."

But a Citrus County judge brushed aside their pleas Thursday and prohibited any contact between Lilley and the girl as part of Lilley's sentence. She will spend two years on house arrest and eight more on sex-offender probation.

Lilley broke from her blank stare and looked toward the student and her father. Sobbing, the teenager left the courtroom and fled up a flight of stairs.

Her father stayed to hear the rest of the sentencing of Lilley, who pleaded no contest to lewd and lascivious battery, a second-degree felony punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

* * *

This is hardly the first time a teacher was prosecuted for having sex with a student. Some cases, like Debra Lafave's, have garnered more attention than others.

But this case has an unusual twist of its own: the father's approach.

"This is a new one for me," said Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Charlotte, N.C., who treats survivors of childhood sexual abuse. "I've never heard of anything like this. I've never heard a parent colluding with that."

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said relationships like the one between Lilley and the student are more common than most people think.

"The part that surprises me the most is the father," Finkelhor said. "He has not gotten that the woman has violated the law and shown extremely bad judgment."

* * *

Lilley quietly answered Circuit Judge Ric Howard's questions. Her face betrayed no emotion as the prosecutor described the alleged sexual acts.

The state and defense had agreed on a plea deal and presented it to the judge.

"Amy is a fine and decent person who has made a terrible, terrible mistake," defense attorney Michael Blackstone told the court. "That's not to say she shouldn't be punished by the state and




[Times photo: Will Vragovic]
Amy Lilley, 36, accused of having a sexual relationship with a student, and her lawyer Michael Blackstone entered a plea deal Thursday.

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she understands that. She stands before the court willing to admit her culpability and accept her punishment."

The girl lives with her father. Neither of them wanted Lilley prosecuted. The girl and Lilley dreamed of growing old together. Their e-mails, which prosecutors obtained, mentioned marriage.

But the mother, who is divorced from the girl's father, wanted Lilley in prison for a long time.

"No matter what my daughter or her father requests, for there to be any kind of contact between Amy Lilley and (the girl) would be a grave mistake," the mother wrote in an e-mail that a prosecutor read aloud in court. "Although my daughter feels she is in love with this child molester, she still has three long years ahead of her to realize the unfortunate outcome of this terrible situation and the disaster and the heartbreak it has caused to so many people."

Despite the mother's plea for harsh sentencing, Assistant State Attorney Richard Buxman said there was no indication of forced abuse. Also, the girl and her father did not want to be deposed. Based on their wishes and Lilley's lack of a criminal record, the state was willing to accept a plea deal.

As part of the plea deal, Lilley will surrender her teaching certificate and will not be allowed around children younger than 18, with the exception of her two children.

Lilley still could face prosecution in Orange County. She had sex with the student at an Orlando area hotel, according to Citrus County sheriff's Detective Kat Klyap. Lilley and her parents declined to comment after the hearing. So did the student and her father, whose names the Times is withholding because of the nature of the case.

* * *

In July, a Citrus High School teacher's aide pleaded guilty to having sex with two teen boys and was sentenced to three years in prison and 12 years of sex-offender probation.

In Hillsborough County, Wharton High School girls' basketball coach Jaymee Wallace was arrested on charges of making sexual advances to a 15-year-old girl.

Lafave got house arrest and probation in her Hillsborough case and still awaits resolution of Marion County charges.

"It's very hard for society to believe that a woman would harm a child," Frawley-O'Dea said. "It's harder to accept a woman as a child abuser. Society wants to hold women up as child protectors, caretakers and nurturers.

"People want to look for other reasons other than there is something exploitive about the woman," she said. "But if we want gender equality we are going to have accept that women can be criminals and sexual offenders.

"Her dad and (the) daughter need some counseling."

Times researchers Angie Drobnic Holan and Caryn Baird contributed to this report. Dawn Reiss can be reached at 352 860-7303 or dreiss@sptimes.com

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