

5 Acquitted in Sex-Abuse Case

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Dix Hills youths cleared of charges they molested girl and videotaped the incident

By Bob Wacker and Scott Minerbrook

Riverhead—As their parents cheered, five Dix Hills teenagers were acquitted yesterday of charges that they seized, forcibly stripped and sexually molested a female classmate while videotaping the incident.

Several of the jurors smiled at the defendants as foreman Benjamin Gural, 63, of Sound Beach, a postal clerk, read the verdicts. The defendants' parents and friends embraced and wept openly at each "not guilty."

The County Court jury began deliberations Monday; jurors spent about three hours in actual deliberations, and about four more listening to the court stenographer read back testimony.

"It's the first time in eight months I've smiled," said Richard Steck, father of 18-year-old defendant Paul Steck. It was at his home at 40 Buttonwood Dr., where the girl had claimed the attack took place, and where more than 20 neighbors, family members, and well-wishers gathered after the trial. "We did it . . . We did it," Steck shouted. Then he began throwing away reams of letters; "hate mail from the world's sick minds," he called them.

After the acquittal, some jurors said that 11 of them—the panel was composed of eight men and four women—were convinced at the beginning of deliberations that the youths were innocent. But they said the 12th, while not convinced of their guilt, was reluctant to vote for acquittal.

Juror Barbara Benney, of Coram, a physical therapist at St. Charles Hospital, claimed credit for convincing him. "I just said, 'What would you do if somebody accused you of something like this?' He paused for a minute and then finally said, 'Okay.'" Jurors said the absence of medical evidence that the girl had been bruised made them doubt her story.

The girl testified that she had been carried, kicking and screaming, into a basement playroom, stripped and sexually abused in front of a video camera at the Steck home Jan. 25. Steck's parents were away attending the Super Bowl in New Orleans that day.

But the boys testified that she was a willing participant and that she laughed and giggled throughout the episode. A prosecution witness, Eric Yanone, 17, a youth who witnessed the incident, said the girl had offered to have sex with all five boys.

During a pretrial hearing on Aug. 17, it was disclosed that Steck's mother, Rosalind, had erased the videotape, apparently a day after the incident and a day before police arrived to confiscate the recording.



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Celebrating their acquittal at the Dix Hills home of Paul Steck are, from left, Steck, Mark Stevens, Hal Bitran, James Butkevich and Jonathan Rochell. Friends and members of their families are in the rear.

comment. After the incident became public in January, the girl dropped out of Half Hollow Hills High School West and sought private tutors to finish her senior year.

Assistant District Attorney Kevin Fox, who prosecuted the case, left the office after the verdict without comment.

Linda Rochell of Oriole Way, whose son, Jonathan, had been charged by the alleged victim with blocking her escape, said she and her husband Ed "were really behind Jonathan 100 per cent. We both adore him. You know, mothers and fathers always warn their daughters about bad boys. It's too bad we never warn our sons about bad girls."

Besides Steck and Rochell, acquitted were James Butkevich, 17, of 148 DeForest Rd., Mark Stevens, 18, of 7 Red Oak Court, and Hal Bitran of 51 Buttonwood Dr. All had been charged with sexual abuse, which carries a maximum penalty of 7 years in prison.

said, of liberation.

In their summations after the six-day trial, defense attorneys concentrated on inconsistencies in the girl's story: at various times she had accused different boys of different acts, the lawyers said.

Floyd Sarisohn, Rochell's attorney, said: "The jury's verdict vindicated the boys but it can't help the girl at all. My heart really goes out to her."

As the Steck family celebrated, William Stevens, father of Mark Stevens, was openly bitter that the matter came to trial. "This thing should never have been in court, and it should never have come to a grand jury. If it weren't for the fact that this is an election year, it wouldn't have happened. They pushed this thing because it was Dix Hills, where nothing bad ever happens," he said.

Said Jerry Bitran, father of Hal, "It is a vindication for these kids, yes. But look at the community. A lot of people were divided on both sides of the case. I think it was something the community didn't want