

Watsonville man acquitted of charges resulting from Petaluma sex sting on Dateline's 'To Catch a Predator'

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By PAUL PAYNE - SANTA ROSA PRESS DEMOCRAT

SANTA ROSA - He was kicked out of the Navy and spent time in jail.

Tuesday, five years after appearing on NBC Dateline's "To Catch a Predator," 26-year-old Joseph Roisman of Watsonville was acquitted of charges of attempting to have sex with an online decoy posing as a 13-year-old girl from Petaluma.

He is the only one of 29 men prosecuted in the 2006 sting to beat the rap.

"I'm ready to move on with my life," Roisman said. "Hopefully the service will take me back," he said of his desire to continue his military career.

His mother, Deborah Roisman of Watsonville, shouted, "Woo woo!" as Judge Arthur Wick ordered the case thrown out after six days of trial testimony, and later had harsh words for those involved in the TV show that implicated her son.

She said she and her pediatrician husband spent more than \$100,000 defending their son. She vowed to sue NBC producers and called the sting a "huge waste" of tax money.

"They made my son's life a living hell for five years," she said.

A Dateline spokeswoman, Amy Lynn, did not return a call seeking comment.

In reaching his decision, Wick found prosecutors had not proven Roisman had "specific intent" to commit the crime - attempting lewd acts with a child under age 14.

He also criticized the tactics used by Dateline's partner, online watchdog Perverted Justice, whom he suggested lacked credibility and engaged in entrapment.

"The axiom, 'Actions speak louder than words,' clearly does not apply in this case," Wick said from the bench.

Wick stopped the trial and issued the verdict without the defense team presenting its case and before consideration by the jury.

Roisman's attorney, Stephen Turer, argued his client's online chats were innocuous and that he intended nothing other than "cuddling and watching movies" when he rode a bus 110 miles to meet the girl.

Turer argued it was Perverted Justice officials who steered the conversation toward sex. Although Roisman was told the girl's age, he was doubtful because of her mature-sounding voice and sophisticated talk, Turer said.

"This case is the poster child for the abuse in this program," Turer said after the acquittal. "They took everything away from this kid just to make a TV show."

Prosecutors said there was enough evidence to bring Roisman to trial.

"We were disappointed the jury didn't have the opportunity to review all the facts of the case," District Attorney Jill Ravitch said.

Roisman was on leave from the Navy when he was arrested in a three-day sex sting in Petaluma in August 2006.

Like the other defendants, which included a doctor from the East Bay Area, Perverted Justice volunteers contacted him in an Internet chat room.

Roisman talked to a "Tori_Rox_2006," who identified herself as a 13-year-old girl living in Petaluma.

He questioned her about the oldest person she had sex with and suggested they "cut up some fruit and eat it off each other," according to court documents.

Roisman eventually agreed to a rendezvous at the Castle Drive house, where he stripped off his shirt upon entering the backyard after arriving by

bus from the Watsonville area.

However, instead of the girl, he was met by cameras and Dateline host Chris Hansen, who made a name and reputation for himself from his confrontations in the show. After a brief conversation, which was recorded for TV, Roisman was arrested by Petaluma police, also recorded for the show.

Sonoma County jurors leaving the courthouse Tuesday said they were not impressed by the Southern California-based group's methods. Windsor bank teller Kathleen Kerckhoff said they obviously induced Roisman to act the way he did. She said she would have found him not guilty if the case had come to the jury.

"I don't have any respect for Perverted Justice after this trial," she said. "I think they do have quotas. They have an agenda. It was the right resolution."

In all, prosecutors obtained convictions on 27 defendants. Sentences ranged from probation to nine months in jail.

Among the most notorious cases was that of Piedmont cancer doctor, Maurice Wolin, 53, who last year got two months in jail and lifetime sex offender registration after a protracted legal battle.

Southern California-based Perverted Justice claims 546 convictions nationwide since 2004. Perverted Justice officials did not respond to an email Tuesday seeking comment.