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Teacher wins sex case

Jury disbelieves girls' claims of molestation by coach

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BRIDGEPORT - A former city school teacher, acquitted Wednesday of molesting five female students, wants to return to work. Former Roosevelt School teacher Alvin Russell broke into a smile and embraced his lawyer, Robert Berke, after the not-guilty verdict was announced.

He said later he would like to get another job with the school system. "I would like to get a job back, not teaching, but I would like to get a job back."

"Obviously, my client is ecstatic at the verdict," Berke added. "It has been a long two years to get to this point."

The foreman of the jury, Eric Burns of Fairfield, said the jurors didn't believe testimony by the five girls who claimed they had been molested.

"We all walked into the jury room, looked at each other and basically said, 'Eh.' There was not enough oomph behind their testimony," he said. "Where they said everything occurred and how the teacher could have done it just didn't jibe."

Burns said the jury was convinced the girls made up the accusations against Russell, but that their motive wasn't clear. "It could have had something to do with grades or something else, but we didn't hear that evidence."

Russell, 45, a teacher at Roosevelt School for 17 years and the girls' basketball coach at the school, was fired last year based on the girls' allegations.

Supt. of Schools Sonia Diaz Salcedo wouldn't comment Wednesday on the verdict. "We followed the proper procedures and did our own investigation and [the state Department of Children and Families] substantiated the allegations," she said.

The jury of six women and one man deliberated about three hours before reaching its verdict.

Burns simply answered "not guilty" as Clerk Ron Ferraro read each of the 21 counts against Russell.

Russell had been charged with 10 counts of fourth-degree sexual assault, nine counts of risk of injury to a minor and two counts of attempted fourth-degree sexual assault.

"I give a lot of credit for the girls coming forward and testifying what happened to them," said Assistant State's Attorney Cornelius Kelly. "Though I'm disappointed with the outcome, I do believe in the jury system and accept the jury's verdict."

During the week-long trial Kelly presented testimony from five girls, all now 14, who testified that during the 2001

school year Russell often made comments about their breasts and would grab them under the pretense of trying to determine if their breasts were fake.

But Berke contended the girls got together and made up the allegations against Russell.

He presented two teachers in his defense case who testified they believe the girls fabricated the allegations. One said she believed the girls made the allegations because they had been cut from the basketball team.

However, no evidence that they had been cut from the team was presented during the trial.

Russell did not testify.

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