

HELP CENTER DIRECTOR ACQUITTED OF CHARGES

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The director of a Lexington drug rehabilitation program was acquitted yesterday of charges that he unlawfully held three young people in the program against their will.

George Ross, the founder and clinical director of Possibilities Unlimited, a drug-treatment program for people between ages 12 and 25, seemed elated after a Fayette District Court judge read aloud the three not guilty verdicts. Ross had been charged with three counts of unlawful imprisonment.

The verdicts were greeted with applause from about 20 Possibilities Unlimited supporters. Ross, smiling widely, leaped to his feet.

"We're extremely pleased that the verdict went in our behalf," Ross said later. "I think it now will be known, as we've known all along, that children are not abused at Possibilities Unlimited."

However, the allegations were sufficient to warrant some changes in the way the program is run. Ross said he would meet Tuesday night with his board of directors to discuss possible changes in the program's operation.

While Ross was celebrating his victory, at least one of the young people who maintained that Ross unlawfully held her in the program was also claiming a victory of sorts.

██████████ Hodgins, who spent five months in Possibilities Unlimited, predicted that a lot of good would come out of Ross's being brought to trial.

"The people who are in there (the program) will find out they don't honestly have to be there," she said. Although Ms. Hodgins, 23, of Lexington, was portrayed during the trial as a negligent mother who often left her 2-year-old daughter alone, she said she had no regrets about having made her allegation against Ross. "I would do it 10 times over," she said after the verdict.

The charges against the 36-year-old Ross, a counseling psychologist, stemmed from criminal complaints filed by Ms. Hodgins and two Frankfort teen-agers in the program. Originally, there had been five complaints and five charges against Ross, but Judge John Adams dismissed two of the charges earlier this week.

Police began looking into Possibilities Unlimited last February after the grandmother of ██████████ Mullins, one of the Frankfort boys, complained to police that two of her grandsons were being held in the program against their will. In addition to Lexington police, social workers from the state Cabinet for Human Resources investigated the allegation.

Mullins, who is now 19 and who spent nearly six months in the program, yesterday said he thought the jury might have been influenced by the possible ramifications that returning a guilty verdict might have had for the program.

"I think maybe the jury was afraid that if they convicted him that they wouldn't have any kind of drug program for people seriously dependent on drugs or who were really bad addicts," Mullins said.

Indeed, Ross and his attorney, Larry Roberts, acknowledged that a conviction could have been a severe blow to the drug program.

"If it had gone against us, it would make it extremely difficult for us to continue, and I'm just happy we've been able to get a non-guilty verdict," Ross said. "It fully exonerated us from the allegations that were made. Now we can get on to going about what Possibilities Unlimited is all about."

Ross founded Possibilities Unlimited two years ago and patterned it after a similar drug program in Florida where he had worked. In the program, young people who have overcome a drug problem serve as counselors for other young people trying to overcome the problem. Ross was accused of using physical and psychological restraint to keep the three young people from leaving the program.

Ross's trial lasted eight days and included testimony from about 50 witnesses. However, it took the jury only about 90 minutes to reach its verdict. Each of the charges against Ross was a misdemeanor and carried a punishment of up to 12 months in jail and a fine of up to \$500.

Despite the adverse publicity generated as a result of the charges, Ross said he thought it was all for a purpose.

"I think it brought to the forefront a very emotional issue. . . . I think we made some great strides as a result of this trial in letting the public know that it is an issue before us and it's not going to go away."

Ross joked about how he had often prayed that the community would become more aware of the program. "He didn't quite tell me how he was going to do it," Ross quipped, "but I think the community knows there's a program called Possibilities Unlimited now."

In addition to bad publicity, Ross said the charges had cost the program between \$70,000 and \$75,000, much of it in lost revenue because of fewer youngsters enrolling in the program after the charges were filed in late May.

"There are several families that have not come forth to get help for their children, and we could have many children in our community three or four months drug-free if it had not been for these allegations."

Although Ross declined to speculate about possible changes in store for Possibilities Unlimited, throughout the trial prosecutors Phillip Moloney and Jack Giles criticized the fact that Ross had no peer review in his operation of Possibilities Unlimited.

They also criticized Ross' technique for determining whether a person had a drug problem. That technique was limited to interviews with the parents and usually a brief interview with the youngster. Moloney was critical of the fact that Ross never sought a second opinion or used any sort of psychological test to determine whether a person was dependent on chemicals.

Mullins, who said he thought he was falsely labeled a drug addict, said he was both hurt and surprised by the verdict.

"It hurt me in the fact I know that I was held against my will and it's happening right now to a lot of other people. I really didn't expect it to come out this way. I expected us to get a guilty verdict just because of how obvious it was that they did hold us and treated us the way they did."

- **Caption: Photo mug GEORGE ROSS**

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