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Ex-Haskell cop gets 45 years for rape conviction



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By D. E. Smoot
(<http://muskogee phoenix.com>)

A former Haskell police officer convicted of sexually molesting a 15-year-old girl was ordered Wednesday to serve 45 years in prison.

Robert Samuel Wheeland, 54, was convicted March 9 of two counts of lewd molestation and one count of second-degree rape. Authorities say Wheeland used his position as a police officer to prey on troubled young girls.

Jurors rendered three guilty verdicts in less than two hours after listening to evidence presented during the course of three days. The jury recommended a 15-year sentence for each conviction. Associate District Judge Norman D. Thygesen ordered Wheeland to serve those sentences consecutively.

The 15-year-old victim's parents and the mothers of three girls who have made similar allegations, expressed satisfaction with the sentence, of which Wheeland must serve at least 85 percent before he is eligible for parole. The parents, however, vowed to continue a quest for justice on behalf of their daughters whose cases have yet to be adjudicated.

During Wheeland's sentencing hearing Wednesday morning, Wheeland's lawyer urged the court to consider Wheeland's work as a public servant while weighing factors upon which Wheeland's sentence was based.

"Justice cannot be meted out in a vacuum," Chad Richardson said. "We must separate emotion ... (from the process) and give him some credit for his service."

Assistant District Attorney Nikki Baker Dotson countered Richardson's plea for leniency, arguing that Wheeland's 20-year career with the Haskell Police Department falls short of what most people would consider public service.

"It is that service that was abused and used against us," Dotson said of the way Wheeland used his position with the police department to earn the confidence and trust of the 15-year-old girl he later raped. "He was one of us — in law enforcement — appointed to serve and protect, but he chose only to protect himself."

Dotson cited a presentence investigation report that reveals Wheeland's failure to accept responsibility for his acts and an absence of remorse. Dotson said the report indicates Wheeland poses a threat to the community.

"The first step toward solving a problem is to admit you have one," Dotson said. "He continues to blame the victim and make excuses for everything."

Before imposing Wheeland's sentence, Thygesen weighed in on the debate about Wheeland's supposed "service to the community." Thygesen illustrated his point by recalling the life of a prominent figure of American history whose career included a commission to serve as commandant of West Point during the Revolutionary War era.

"He became much better known for what he did later in life," Thygesen said. "Benedict Arnold (became) the most notorious traitor in American history."

Thygesen also expressed his confidence in the jurors and the product of their service as jurors.

"I find this (case) to be such a breach of the public trust that I cannot in good conscience order any other sentence than this," Thygesen said.

Wheeland, who is being held in the Muskogee County/City Detention Facility, is scheduled to be tried in June for charges resulting from allegations made by three other girls, one of whom testified during the trial in March. Investigators say statements made by a fifth girl may prompt the filing of additional charges.

Lucas Hale, the father of the victim at the center of Wheeland's first trial, said he hopes Wheeland's conviction and 45-year sentence will prompt others who have been hesitant to report similar experiences to come forward.

"I would not be surprised if there are many more victims in the community," Hale said. "When our daughter came forward we were afraid because he (Wheeland) was a police officer."