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The Region

Deputy Pleads Not Guilty to Abusing Nieces

Riverside County man, 30, is accused of 'substantial' molestation of five girls -- ages 10, 13, 14, 15 and 16 -- over the last eight months.

January 08, 2004 | Lance Pugmire | Times Staff Writer

A Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy assigned to the Twin Towers Jail in Los Angeles was jailed in Riverside County after pleading not guilty Wednesday to eight counts of child molestation and one count of filming and possessing child pornography.

Jorge De La Cruz, 30, who lives in an unincorporated area of Riverside County near Corona, was charged with committing a variety of sexual acts on five of his nieces, ages 10, 13, 14, 15 and 16, from May 2003 until as recently as Dec. 29.

"It is very disturbing that this person would use his position of power on children of his family members," said Michael Hestrin, the Riverside County deputy district attorney assigned to the case. "There's a violation of trust here, with the community and the victims. This was substantial sexual misconduct."

De La Cruz was arrested by Riverside County sheriff's deputies Monday following a complaint filed by one of the girls, Hestrin said.

A spokeswoman for the Riverside County district attorney's office said De La Cruz, who has been a Los Angeles County deputy for 18 months, was placed on unpaid administrative leave Monday.

Hestrin said he had been told by a Los Angeles County sheriff's official that De La Cruz would be terminated once charges were filed.

De La Cruz could face life in prison if convicted of the charges.

Riverside County sheriff's investigators searched De La Cruz's residence Wednesday after his wife told police that a videotape existed in the home that allegedly showed De La Cruz fondling one of the nieces while she was in a bathtub, a law enforcement source said.

"I certainly haven't seen any film yet," said Steve Harmon, De La Cruz's attorney. "I'm not sure that it makes this [defense] more difficult. It is what it is. The part it will end up playing in this, I don't know yet."

De La Cruz forced himself upon his nieces and threatened the children with physical harm if they revealed the sexual abuse, the complaint filed in Riverside County Superior Court alleges. The prosecutor described the alleged sexual contact as "coerced," adding that the nieces would often visit De La Cruz at his home during daytime hours. Hestrin said De La Cruz worked nights at Los Angeles County jail.

De La Cruz "went from one victim to the next," Hestrin alleged. "He appears to be no different than other pedophiles we've prosecuted, other than he just happens to be an officer. Obviously, he has a problem."

Dressed in a standard orange jail jumpsuit, De La Cruz sat away from eight other defendants who were seated in a jury box awaiting arraignment in the courtroom of Riverside County Superior Court Judge Gordon R. Burkhart.

Harmon waived a formal reading of the nine counts, entering the not guilty plea and agreeing to the next court hearing date of Feb. 9.

Three of De La Cruz's family members sobbed outside the courtroom Wednesday, following the arraignment.

"His family loves him very much, and they are worried for him," Harmon said. "They stand behind him."