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## Local cop gets 17 years for sexual assault

Woodbridge cop took half-nude photos of teen, assaulted stepson

BY KATHY CHANG Staff Writer

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Douglas Karlson, a veteran Woodbridge police officer, was sentenced to up to 17 years in prison last week for taking hundreds of suggestive photographs of a 15-year-old Colonia girl and, in a separate case, for sexually assaulting his stepson, 26, beginning when the boy was 14 years old.

Karlson, 47, an 18-year member of the Woodbridge Police Department and an Old Bridge resident, appeared stoic wearing a tan suit with a pronounced beard as Middlesex County Superior Court Judge Frederick P. DeVesa read his sentence on Feb. 23. Karlson declined to speak. Karlson's wife of 18 years, Donna Karlson, who is a Middlesex County sheriff's officer, also appeared stoic throughout.

Karlson, who was up for promotion as sergeant before his arrest on July 20, 2006, was relieved from his duties as a Woodbridge police officer after the sentencing. He has been suspended without pay since his arrest on July 20.

Both cases were tried in conjunction with each other. In July 2006, a jury found Karlson guilty of official misconduct and three counts of endangering the welfare of a child by taking hundreds of suggestive photographs of a 15-year-old girl in the Colonia section of Woodbridge between Oct. 1, 2004, and May 10, 2005. In December 2006, a jury found Karlson guilty of aggravated sexual assault and sexual assault in the second degree upon his stepson between June 26, 1994, and June 25, 1996.

In July 2006, Karlson admitted taking pictures of the 15-year-old girl, who is the daughter of Ann Marie Dobbs, 48, who Karlson first met as a police officer when he responded to a call.

Karlson has admitted that he had an affair with Dobbs and said they were intimate a few times. He also admitted to taking partially nude photographs of the girl, but said that he did so with the girl's and her mother's permission.

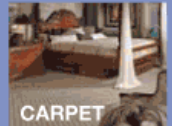
In early 2006, Anne Marie Dobbs pleaded guilty before Judge DeVesa to a charge of endangering the welfare of a child for her part in photographing the girl. She will be sentenced following the conclusion of Karlson's trial.

During the two-day retrial in December 2006, the 26-year-old victim, who kept his secret of being sexually abused quiet for years, told the jury that he heard about the investigation of his stepfather and read it in the newspapers.

The victim, who testified he didn't come forward earlier because he thought no one would believe him since Karlson was a Woodbridge police officer, said he

confided in some friends and they told him that he needed to do something.

Then the victim went to Woodbridge Lt. Dennis Gorman, who was a sergeant at the time. He described Gorman as "like an

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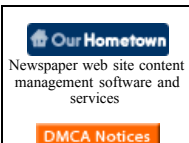
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uncle to me" and also a close friend to his stepfather. Gorman referred him to Investigator Rajesh Chopra of the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office on June 2, 2005.

On June 3, 2005, the victim stated to Chopra that he was sexually abused by Karlson at his stepfather's residence in Old Bridge about every two months between June 26, 1994, and

June 25, 1996.

Both Karlson and his wife Donna testified at both trials denying the boy's account that Karlson sexually assaulted him.

DeVesa said while Karlson has done many positive things in his life and has had no prior criminal activity against him until today [Feb. 23], it doesn't overshadow what he has been found guilty of.

"I don't think he [Karlson] contemplated what harm he would have caused," said DeVesa. "The defendant, as a police officer, is a weak mitigating factor [for the defense] because he should have clearly understood that taking those pictures would have caused emotional harm. I

do believe the aggravating factors in this case outweigh the mitigating factors."

Karlson's 26-year-old stepson, who spoke softly wearing a black suit, told the judge he still has nightmares and troubling memories from his childhood. He said some part of him feels responsible for what happened to the 15-year-old Colonia girl.

"I could have stopped that, but I was too scared to come forward," he said. "It's been on my mind. I can't tell you exactly how my life would have been if this never happened."

The boy is Karlson's stepson and the biological son of his wife, Donna.

William Dobbs, the father of the 15-year-old girl, told the judge that the whole ordeal has caused a burden on his whole family.

"My wife and I were only married two years when this happened," he said. "There was a burden on our marriage and I feel so bad for my daughter. She missed the last two years of high school, which should have been the happiest time of her life. She had to move to a different school when all her friends are down here. It's just been tough on us."

Before Karlson was sentenced, his Milltown-based defense attorney, Thomas Buck, said his client has been suffering from psychological problems from the loss of his job and the tragic incident that occurred in March 2006 in Sayreville that took the life of his grandson. Buck said Karlson blames himself for the incident.

In March 2006, Erik William Sturgis, 5, died in a house fire, when his father Kevin Sturgis, 31, had to leave him home alone when he went to work. Erik Sturgis is the grandson of Donna Karlson and the step-grandson of Douglas.

Karlson took care of the five-year-old up until he was arrested. The state Division of Youth and Family Services said that Karlson was an "inappropriate baby sitter," after he had been arrested on July 20.

Karlson was sentenced up to 17 years, but will become eligible for parole after six years. He has 45 days to appeal the sentence.