

Former police officer pleads guilty to possessing child porn - Cops and Courts - Charleston Daily Mail - West Virginia News and Sports

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Man could face 10 years in prison for sending pornographic images to teen
by Ashley B. Craig

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - A former Ripley police officer tearfully admitted in federal court Monday he sent pornographic images to an underage girl who he also had been accused of harassing after their sexual relationship ended.

George Michael Puskas II, 31, pleaded guilty by way of information to possession of child pornography Monday afternoon before U.S. District Judge John Copenhaver in Charleston. In exchange for the plea, prosecutors dropped a handful of other charges against him.

Puskas resigned from the Ripley Police Department in 2012 amid allegations he'd behaved inappropriately while on the job. He was on the force for nearly four years.

He wore a dark-colored suit as he stood in the courtroom Monday. His family sat directly behind him.

He said he'd had a sexual relationship with a girl from the time she was 16 to 18 and that there was video of one of their sexual encounters. He said he sent her at least a dozen photos of himself and that she'd done the same.

In September 2011, five months after she broke up with him, he sent her a photo of them having sex. She was living in Virginia at the time, having fled his advances, according to court documents.

"I sent her one picture of us together," he said.

"Engaged in sexual intercourse?" Copenhaver asked.

"Yes, your honor," Puskas answered.

Puskas began to cry when Copenhaver told him he could possibly face the maximum sentence for the charge -- 10 years in federal prison. A woman believed to be his wife began to sob when the judge said Puskas may have to register as a sex offender for life.

"Mr. Puskas swore an oath to protect and serve the community," U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin said in a statement. "He obviously failed to uphold that oath.

"Pedophiles like Mr. Puskas must be held accountable when they commit disgraceful crimes like this one."

Puskas was first indicted in January on charges of enticing a minor into sexually explicit conduct to produce child porn, possession of child porn and receiving child porn.

But those charges were dismissed in April when a superceding indictment was filed adding transmitting child porn and traveling across state lines with intent to kill, injure, harass and intimidate a person known to the grand jury.

He was then charged in June with possession of child porn. A guilty plea hearing was scheduled soon after.

As part of the plea agreement, Jackson County Prosecutor Kenny Skeen agreed not to prosecute Puskas on any state charges relating to the State Police investigation, according to court documents.

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State Police began investigating him in September 2011 when the girl, then 18, came forward claiming Puskas had sexually exploited her for years.

The woman, whose name has not been released, told investigators they first met when she was 6 or 7 years old. He was her soccer coach at the time.

Although they didn't have sex until she was 16, the romantic relationship began two years earlier, she said.

She was 14 years old when he carried her off the field with an injury and into a storage room where he told her he loved her, kissed her and asked for her phone number, which she provided.

The first time they were intimate he came to her while on duty and in uniform.

She told police they had sex nearly every day from then until their relationship ended in April 2011, about the time she turned 18. She also claimed they met behind a Jackson County school on several occasions and had sex on the hood of his patrol car.

Puskas admitted in court to using his Ripley police-issued digital camera to make one video of them having sex. He used a cellphone to take pornographic pictures of the girl.

Puskas possessed between 10 and 150 pornographic images of the girl that were taken when she was underage, according to the U.S. Attorney's office. He admitted in court documents to saving the pictures to a flash drive and the video to a laptop.

State Police executed a federal search warrant last spring on Puskas' home and at the Ripley Police Department. Troopers recovered a flash drive and laptop computer from his desk. Puskas admitted to deleting the images and video from the computer before the search last spring.

The flash drive, computer and other electronic items were forfeited as part of the plea.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Lisa Johnston argued to have Puskas detained until his sentencing later this year, but David Bungard, Puskas' attorney, argued that Puskas had been compliant while on home confinement for the last five months.

Bungard said Puskas had been living with his parents in Jackson County while on home confinement. He has been caring for his chronically ill mother and watching over his two-year-old daughter while his wife, who is expecting their second child, worked in sales.

Bungard said he didn't feel comfortable having Puskas in jail with other inmates who would find out eventually that he was a police officer. Johnston agreed that any time Puskas spent in jail between now and his sentencing would have to be in protective custody.

Copenhaver said Puskas had been compliant while on home confinement and decided not to change the arrangement.

In addition to prison time, Puskas also faces up to \$250,000 in fines and five years to life on supervised release. Sentencing is scheduled for Oct. 1.

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