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Retired Chillicothe police officer sentenced to 2 years for sexual abuse

Road to prison began with 7 text messages

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Richard Eric McKee, center, signs his sex offender notification requirements before sentencing Monday at the Ross County Courthouse. / Photos by Frank Robertson/Gazette

Written by **Jona Ison**
Gazette Staff Writer

now former volunteer for a school's Christian fellowship group.

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Richard Eric McKee, 49, was taken to prison to begin serving a two-year sentence on multiple charges of sexual abuse of a minor. After serving his time, McKee will be on post-release control for five years and will be required to register as a sex offender for 25 years.

The messages McKee sent to a 15-year-old girl he knew during the first two weeks of May 2011 likely had become habit because it's

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thought his inappropriate interactions with her began 20 months before. While one was simply "Hi, beautiful," a second message referred to a specific sexual act and another cautioned her not to tell his wife or her dad about "today's events."

The messages were enough for the girl's family members who found the text messages to go to Ross County Children's Services, where the investigation began. The investigation ultimately was

passed from the Ross County Sheriff's Office onto the Bureau of Criminal Investigation and led to the discovery of thousands more messages on Facebook, Prosecutor Matthew Schmidt said.

Phone records also showed countless texts between the two, but the content was not recovered from any texts other than those found on the phone by family, he said.

The investigation led to a November 2011 indictment, and in May, McKee pleaded guilty to importuning, unauthorized use of the Ohio Law Enforcement Gateway and two counts of sexual imposition. That guilty plea was followed up in August with pleas to five third-degree felony charges of unlawful sexual conduct that alleged he had digitally penetrated the girl. Another five charges of unlawful sexual conduct were dismissed as part of the plea.

The two-year sentence is one Schmidt said he understands some people in the community will not be pleased with. He admits he, too, might have liked to have seen and requested something more.

However, Schmidt said it was a sentence the victim endorsed because her biggest interest in the case was for McKee to admit what he had done.

"Given the defendant's former occupation, this case has certainly drawn its fair share of public interest -- with supporters of the

defendant calling out for leniency and others opining that the court should lock him up and throw away the key," Schmidt said in court. "The opinion that matters the most to the state is that of the person directly affected by the defendant's actions --the victim."

"It should be remembered by those on both sides of the aisle that the young lady involved in this matter has had to endure a great

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McKee, left, is directed out of the courtroom by Ross County Sheriff's Col. Jeff Keener after sentencing Monday at the Ross County Courthouse. / Photos by Frank Robertson/Gazette

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deal of stress, scrutiny and embarrassment. It is understandable that the victim wanted to hear the defendant admit to what he had done and thereafter to move on with her life, put this matter behind her and salvage the remaining years of high school. It is with respect to the victim's wishes that the state has agreed, in exchange for the defendant's guilty pleas, to recommend a cumulative prison sentence of two years."

Schmidt also said the typical sentence he has seen on third-degree felony charges of unlawful sexual conduct is between community control and one to two years in prison. Unlike a charge of rape -- with which McKee was not charged -- the charges did not have any mandatory sentence attached.

The victim offered a verbal impact statement, talking about how McKee had been a role model and how he had told her to call him "dad."

"I wish my eyes were as open then as they are now. ... It was always about you. I feel like you stole precious years from me," she said, adding she's been hurt, angry and afraid. "You no longer can control me or define me."

She also said she hopes to help other girls who are being manipulated in the same way.

Judge Jhan Corzine, who filled in for an ailing Judge Mike Ater on Monday, reprimanded McKee and told him he was lucky his victim is not vindictive.

"Our community is lessened and harmed whenever an officer who takes an oath to serve and protect violates citizens of this community. ... You were an adult. You knew better," Corzine said.

Addressing the court just before receiving his sentence, McKee apologized and said he has remorse for anything he has said or done that has harmed anyone. He also said he knows he was not a good example for others.

"Sin enters your heart, and the devil can mess you up. That's still my fault because I let him in. ... I never had any intent of hurting anyone in my life," McKee said.

"As far as sins go, it's a big one," Corzine told McKee from the bench after sentencing. "I certainly hope when your payment is finished with this case that you remember the pain you have caused and that it never happens again."

Unlike most times when sentencing a defendant who came in free on bail, McKee was not handcuffed in the court. Sheriff George Lavender and colonels Jeff Keener and T.J. Hollis escorted him into a back room of the court after sentencing.

Shortly thereafter, Lavender told the Gazette that McKee had been handcuffed and that they wanted to get him out of the courtroom quickly because of the high emotions.

Lavender said they also were working to quickly get a warrant to take him to prison in an effort to prevent having to put him in the Ross County Jail. The reasoning was twofold -- one, to not put jail employees who likely had worked with McKee in an awkward position and for McKee's safety from other inmates who know him as an officer, Lavender said.

The victim's family provided a written statement to the press via a victim advocate who expressed their sadness about McKee's betrayal.

"The impacts of his choices have not only been devastating to our daughter and our family, but because of his status in the community, it has brought shame to law enforcement, our community and our church," the statement reads. "We are shocked by the hundreds of hours spent to control and manipulate our daughter. He used his position in society as a police officer and minister to slowly and carefully change a young girl's thoughts for his own use. Thousands and thousands of text messages, appearances at field trips and outings with her friends were used to gain and maintain his control."

After retiring from the Chillicothe Police Department on March 1, 2011, McKee was an unofficial volunteer with the Fellowship of Christian Students. His abuse of the girl is thought to have begun in September 2010 and ended upon the May 2011 discovery of the text messages.

The girl's family is hopeful everyone involved, including McKee, can move forward and heal.

"We sincerely hope Eric gets the help he needs, and wish to move forward with forgiveness. Our hope is that God grant peace and healing to the lives damaged by this nightmare," the family's statement reads. "We truly appreciate the tremendous amount of support we have received from the investigators, the staff at the prosecutor's office, family, friends and countless strangers."

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