

Former Kent County deputy sentenced to 50 years for sexual assault

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A former Kent County sheriff's deputy has been convicted of aggravated sexual assault and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Duane Eric West, 29, has been on the other side of the law since January, when he was accused of inappropriate activity with a 13-year-old girl.

A jury of six men and six women deliberated just nine minutes before returning a guilty verdict on the first-degree felony charge, which carried a possible sentence range of five to 99 years or life. They spent 35 minutes determining his half-century sentence.

The trial was moved from Kent to Haskell County after 39th District Judge Shane Hadaway granted a defense request for a change of venue.

Luke Griffin, investigator for the district that encompasses Kent, Haskell and two other counties, said the suspect befriended the victim while she was staying in Jayton. He drove her to a remote spot in the Claremont Cemetery where they engaged in sexual activity, Griffin said.

The victim returned to her other home in East Texas. Her mother learned of the abuse and contacted authorities there. They investigated the initial stages of the case, then submitted it to law-enforcement officials in Kent County.

West was arrested Jan. 8 by the Texas Rangers, who along with his former employer had investigated the sexual-assault report.

West worked for the Kent County Sheriff's Office about four years, Sheriff William Scogin said. His employment was terminated Jan. 8 upon his confession to a felony offense, the sheriff continued.

West, a first-time criminal offender, rejected a plea offer for a 25-year prison sentence. He instead pleaded not guilty, opting to let a jury determine his fate.

Scogin sided with the jury's guilty verdict and lengthy sentence.

"I think it's fair because of the offense he committed," he said. "Due to his job, he definitely knew that was the wrong thing to be doing."

Prosecution argued West's offense was particularly heinous because his position in law enforcement gave him a sense of authority. The victim should have been able to trust Griffin —

not be sexually assaulted by him — Griffin said.

“(Law-enforcement officers) are the ones we should be able to go to for help, and they should be held at a higher standard,” he said.

Griffin said evidence presented in the trial included testimony from the victim and other witnesses, as well as West’s recorded statements to investigators and a letter he wrote to another former deputy describing the offense.

“He basically admitted to doing it,” Griffin said. “He admitted to everything and went into detail on everything.

Defense attorney Ernest Scott did not return multiple phone calls from A-J Media as of press time.

The offense met legal criteria for aggravated sexual assault because the victim was under 14.

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