

Former LCPD detective pleads guilty in sexual assault case

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LAS CRUCES >> A former Las Cruces Police Department detective admitted Thursday in federal court that he violated the civil rights of a former teenage intern in May 2011 when he sexually assaulted her after a ride-along.

Michael Garcia, 37, pleaded guilty to the criminal civil rights violations, according to a news release issued Thursday by the New Mexico U.S. Attorney's Office.

As part of the plea agreement, Garcia admitted to knowing his actions were illegal and that the girl, a 17-year-old Mayfield High student working with LCPD as part of the Excel program, did not consent.

Garcia, who posted bond and moved to El Paso shortly after his August arrest, agreed to a nine-year prison term. Sentencing has not been scheduled.

According to court documents filed in the state's case against Garcia, the girl asked him to take her back to school. But he drove past it, and into a nearby neighborhood where he unzipped both their pants, fondled her and made her touch his genitals as they sat inside his unmarked police car.

The girl, who had worked for LCPD for several years in hopes of one day becoming a cop and was highly regarded by many in the department, said she was shaking and crying during the assault.

"You're not going to say anything, right?" Garcia reportedly told the girl, according to the complaint. "I have a wife and kid. This is my life."

Garcia, who spent most of his 15 years as an LCPD detective investigating crimes against children, resigned shortly after his arrest.

At the time, his attorney Steven Almanza said the sexual encounter was consensual.

A trial in the state case had been scheduled for April 22 in 3rd Judicial District Court, but Chief Deputy District Attorney Jacinto Palomino said Thursday the charges would be dropped in light of the guilty plea in federal court.

As part of the plea agreement, Garcia will forfeit his law enforcement certification and comply with federal and state sex offender registration requirements, the news release states.

Garcia "exploited his position as a sex crimes detective in a most deplorable way," said Jocelyn Samuels, acting Assistant Attorney General for the civil rights division. "... We commend the

victim for having the courage to come forward, and we are thankful for law enforcement officers in this case, as well as the vast majority of others, who support and help victims of crime."

An attorney hired by the young girl's family could not be reached Thursday for comment.

Late last year, the girl had a chance encounter with another LCPD detective and revealed Garcia's crimes. Police charged Garcia after a swift investigation.

A few days later, he was charged with 10 felony counts of molesting another young girl. Those alleged crimes did not happen while he was on duty.

That case is pending with a trial set in July, according to online court records.

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