

## CRIME

SEPTEMBER 29, 2015

# South Miami cop arrested on charges of misconduct with minors

## HIGHLIGHTS

Joe Mendez supervised the department's Police Explorer program

He is alleged to have bought alcohol for young girls and tried to kiss them

The officer also had illegal photos on his phone, agents say



Joseph Mendez Broward Sheriff's Office

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For years, South Miami Police Detective Joseph Mendez had been lauded for his work with the department's Explorer program, which introduces students into the world of law enforcement.

But state agents say Mendez, 47, got too close to the cadets – trying to seduce underage Explorer girls by providing them booze.

And when the Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigators seized his smartphone, they found what they say was an array of photos of underage girls, some of them having sex, according to an arrest warrant released Tuesday.

Agents on Tuesday arrested Mendez, charging him with 10 counts of charges related to the photos found on his smartphone, and four violations of giving the liquor to underage girls. Through his lawyer, Mendez insisted he was innocent of the allegations.

“He has denied it from day one,” said defense lawyer Douglas Hartman.

Mendez is a longtime South Miami police officer who spent time detached to a Drug Enforcement Administration task force. He is the son of Joe Mendez, a former Hialeah police officer who later became part of a multiagency federal task force known as the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program.

Mendez coordinated South Miami's explorer program between 2009 and 2014.

For his work with the program, he was a finalist for a community policing award for an annual Miami-Dade law-enforcement gala in 2011. One year earlier, South Miami twice named him officer of the month.

The investigation began in June 2014, when South Miami police's internal affairs unit called FDLE to report a complaint that Mendez was involved in "inappropriate" behavior with underage cadets.

One girl told FDLE agents that Mendez picked her up at home, then dared her to flash her breasts before repeatedly trying to get her to drink wine. He also tried kissing her, the warrant said. With another girl, Mendez allegedly tried to play "truth or dare," asking her to "let me slap your a\*\*" and eventually kissing her over beers, the warrant said.

Mendez later admitted he took part in the Explorer program because he was having problems with his marriage and he "needed something else to get my mind off of it." He admitted to buying the drinks while with the girls only to "loosen up" and get "fresh ideas" for the Explorer competitions.

Agents seized his phone, finding 31 images of underage girls, eight of which depicted sexual activity, the warrant said.

He is not the first a police officer has been accused of inappropriate behavior with an Explorer cadet.

In 2007, authorities arrested Miami-Dade Police Officer Michael Anthony McKinnon for seducing a 15-year-old. He later pleaded guilty and was put on probation.

A jury in 2005 convicted Miami Police Officer Jesus Gutierrez after he carried on an affair with a 14-year-old cadet for months. He is still serving a 10-year prison sentence.

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This has been going on for years in cities and towns all over the USA. Whenever you have a large group of people in any organization, in one out of a thousand you will find a bad apple. In Monroe Connecticut last year a officer raped one of his 14 year old explorer girls. He is serving a three year sentence.

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