

Reece Plea...from Page 1A

a teacher at Union County Schools, including sexual relationships with a 15-year-old boy in 2013 and/or 2014, and an 18-year-old student in 2015, Langley said.

Specifically, Reece had been charged with child molestation and sexual assault of a student in the first case, and two counts of sexual assault of a second student in the 2015 case, according to court documents.

It's very likely that Reece would have received prison time had she been found guilty of her original charges, Langley said. However, her Feb. 19 guilty plea to a single felony count of sexual touching in only one of the cases cemented a sentence without jail, and other charges were dismissed.

Essentially, Reece admitted to allowing a 15-year-old student to place her hand on his genitals and allowing the middle school boy to touch her breasts, said Assistant District Attorney Buster Landreau, the veteran public prosecutor who headed up the cases for the DA's Office.

Landreau said Reece told investigators that the relationship with the eighth-grader began after the boy discovered provocative pictures of her stored on her iPad, which she'd left unlocked on her desk at school.

The two then initiated an online exchange that progressed to "her allowing him to touch her, and he alleged there was further sexual contact," Landreau said.

No physical evidence was recovered during investigations into the relationships that were several years old by the time law enforcement learned of their alleged existence, and Reece disputed having sex with either student, Landreau said, despite statements to the contrary both students made to investigators.

Reece paints a starkly different picture of what happened between herself and her 15-year-old student, alleging "intimidation and blackmail" in a statement made to the North Georgia News last week through her legal counsel, Larry Sorgen.

"The incident that began the series of events which ultimately led to charges being brought against Mrs. Reece took place in the Union County Middle School when one of Mrs. Reece's students stole her

iPad from which he offloaded private photographs taken by Mrs. Reece's husband," Sorgen said in the statement.

"Mrs. Reece then became the subject of intimidation and blackmail over a course of several years," the statement continued. "The initial charges brought against Mrs. Reece arose from a significantly flawed investigation and erroneous information provided to the District Attorney's Office."

Shortly after Mrs. Reece's initial arrest, the alleged victim filed a civil lawsuit against her seeking monetary damages. He dismissed that lawsuit while he himself was incarcerated in jail on drug-related charges, rather than submit to being questioned under oath about his allegations.

"The evidence in support of the charges concerning the second alleged victim would not have substantiated any illegal conduct having been committed by Mrs. Reece."

Sorgen went on to say that Reece and Langley's office arrived at a mutual resolution of all charges against her, "by which she did not admit the act and continued to assert innocence, but admitted that sufficient evidence exists upon which a jury could find her guilty, and that it would be in her best interest to resolve the case at this time."

"Mrs. Reece, her husband and her children have suffered through a traumatic time as a result of the charges, now dismissed, having been brought against her and the adverse publicity based upon those unfounded charges," Sorgen said. "The Reece family requests that their right of privacy be respected and that they be allowed to move on from this trying series of events."

According to the DA's Office, the only evidence of "intimidation and blackmail" in the case was Reece's own personal testimony, which was disputed.

For his part, Langley said that if he'd had his way, the cases would have ended in a prison sentence for the ex-teacher, who he felt clearly violated the public trust and abused the power inherent in her position.

However, the district attorney also said that the cases presented various legal challenges that prevented his office from pursuing tougher

charges with more robust sentencing guidelines.

For starters, the cases only came to law enforcement's attention after deputies at the Union County Jail overheard two inmates talking in July 2017 about one of the alleged incidents that neither had been a party to, Langley said.

The overheard information eventually led back to one of the victims in the cases, and the subsequent investigation by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation yielded productive statements and ultimately established a second victim, Langley said.

But multiple witnesses in both cases suffered from credibility issues due to past run-ins with the law, and the initial victim – who had reached adult age by the time the investigations began – became unwilling to cooperate in court proceedings after providing a statement to the GBI, Langley said.

Presenting yet another prosecutorial challenge was what Langley called a "poorly structured statute by the state legislature" regarding individuals with supervisory roles where consent is not a defense, such as jailers and inmates, doctors and hospitalized patients, or teachers and students.

"It would require us to show that the supervisory personnel is in the same school and has supervisory control over that particular student," Langley said.

Applying the statute proved particularly problematic in the 2015 case, Landreau said, as Reece and the 18-year-old student allegedly developed their relationship during his time spent teaching a class at the middle school as part of the high school's Work-Based Learning Program.

As he was a student in the high school and not the middle school, where she was a physical education teacher, he was not directly under her control, Langley said.

"Our argument was she had supervision over him, but the case law went against us in terms of being able to apply that statute to that student and this teacher," Langley said.

After coming to terms with this and other legal challenges facing their cases, Langley said his office had little choice but to "transition from the goal of sending her to prison to the goal of making sure she was labeled a first offender and

could never teach again."

"Ideally, this case would have sent a message that any teacher engaged in this conduct would spend significant time in prison," Langley said. "The difficulties prevented us from reaching that goal."

"But what we have done is shown that circumstances like this will be aggressively investigated and prosecuted, and people will be convicted. If possible, we'll send them to prison. What we have accomplished is, Mrs. Reece will never teach in a school system of this state or any other state again."

Georgia lawmakers have revised the language of the statute in question nearly a dozen times since it was first enacted in 1983, including three times since 2015, and Langley said that none of the revisions go nearly far enough.

"I'm certainly going to make the suggestion to the state legislature to change that to cover all school personnel and all students to make the statute clearer," Langley said. "It should require anyone working in the school system not have sexual contact with any student in the school system."

Added Langley, "If the statute had read that way back at the time of this event, then we would have been in a stronger position. With every case, we have to deal with the witnesses that we have, the evidence we have, and the law that exists at the time of the events. We have pursued this as aggressively as possible given those circumstances."

As previously reported, Reece began her career at Union County Schools in 2004 working as a paraprofessional at the middle school, where she later became a P.E. teacher, school officials said following her initial August 2017 arrest.

She continued to work at the middle school until the 2016-2017 school year, when she transferred to Union County High as a gym teacher and the school's new track and field coach.

Reece lost her teaching job following her arrest at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, which would have marked her second year at the high school.

Her arrests made international headlines that year, having been held up as yet another example of a teacher allegedly having sex with a student.

Blairsville Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 continues active 2020 schedule



Guest speaker George Gaines, PhD



Guest speaker George Gaines, PhD presented information about the "Israeli Security Model and United States' 2nd Amendment" at the February meeting of the Blairsville Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121.

Dr. Gaines, a consultant and an event coordinator with the Israeli Military Florida Academy (a US affiliate of Israel's IMI Academy for Advanced Security & Anti-Terror Training and Special Opera-

tions Group), outlined opportunities and challenges the Israeli security model poses in America today, especially in regards to terrorism.

The Post's 3rd Annual Golf Tournament May 9th at the Old Union Golf Course and the Post's family-oriented 100th Anniversary celebration August 15th were also topics of discussion.

The 100th Anniversary committee will meet Thursday beginning at 6 PM. The Blairsville Chapters of the Sons of the American Legion and the American Legion Riders meet March 12 at 6 PM. The next meeting of the Post and the Legion Auxiliary will be March 17 at 6:30 PM. All meetings are held at the Ma-

yor Leon Davenport Veteran's Center, 78 Blue Ridge Street. All members, and interested veterans and spouses, are encouraged to attend the meetings.

The American Legion is the largest and one of the oldest and most inclusive of all veterans' organizations worldwide and devotes itself to mutual helpfulness, mentoring youth, advocating patriotic honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to fellow service members and veterans.

Check out the Post's website: <https://legionpost121.org> or the Post's Facebook page: "American Legion Post 121 Blairsville, GA" for more information. NMar4,213CA