

» TEACHER IN MOLESTATION CASE #2

# Teen denies making up accusations

BY CHONG CHEE KIN

A STUDENT who has accused his former primary school teacher of molesting him burst into tears during cross examination yesterday.

Responding to questions from the defence lawyer, the teenager denied that he had fabricated the accusations because he was upset at not being chosen for a school sports team in 2003.

The 38-year-old teacher has been charged with molesting the student twice three years ago – once in school and another time in his home.

A third charge accuses the bachelor of masturbating in front of the student, who is now 15.

Defence lawyer Suppiah Thangaveloo's cross-examination centred around an e-mail that the boy wrote to the teacher last year, expressing anger because the accused did not nominate him to be a member of a combined schools sports team.

"I didn't move on with my life. I feel miserable about this incident, but hopefully not for the rest of my life...I'm looked down upon and not given attention," he wrote.

"It's a grudge that has been happening since I was in Primary 6. (That is) why all these years I didn't change much, why I am anti-social around everyone."

There was no mention of the alleged sexual abuse – but Mr Thangaveloo said that it is

clear that the boy bears a grudge against the teacher, who was also his godfather.

The teenager, testifying via video-link, sat with his arms folded across his chest – and stoutly rejected the lawyer's repeated suggestions that he had made up the whole story.

He admitted, however, that he was angry with the teacher when he wrote him the e-mail in February last year for "wrecking" his life.

Mr Thangaveloo asked: "You sounded so angry and were ready to sever all ties with him. Why didn't you add on these allegations of sexual abuse?"

The youth replied: "Because I don't want to say it. Because I don't want to remember it. I just want to leave it all behind."

In a postcard he sent the teacher in September 2003 – months after the alleged sexual abuse took place – he was full of praise and gratitude for helping him with his studies.

"I thank you for lighting my candle up, and inspiring me. Thanks a lot," he wrote.

In a bid to discredit the teenager's accusations, Mr Thangaveloo asked him if he could describe any distinctive features on his client's body, or even the clothes he wore on the days of the alleged offences.

The teenager was unable to remember either.

If convicted, the teacher can be jailed for up to two years and caned.

The case continues today.

# Teacher acquitted of molesting student

**Prosecution failed to prove case against him, says judge**

BY ELENA CHONG

A SCHOOLTEACHER was yesterday cleared of two charges of molesting an 11-year-old boy and one of performing an indecent act in front of him four years ago.

After an 11-day trial, District Judge Jasvender Kaur acquitted the 38-year-old man because the prosecution had failed to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt.

The teacher, represented by Mr Suppiah Thangaveloo, was accused of molesting the boy once in school and another time at his Sengkang home in 2003.

He denied all the accusations.

The court heard that the alleged victim, now 15, was one of the teacher's 22 godsons, whom he often took out for meals, movies and bowling.

He also bought expensive presents and organised celebrations and parties for them.

The defence had argued that the young boy bore a grudge against the teacher, submitting a February 2005 e-mail the boy sent as evidence.

In the e-mail, the boy blamed the teacher for persuading him to change his co-curricular activity (CCA) when he was in Primary 5. He said that cost him the chance to become the captain of his previous CCA team.

He also blamed the teacher for not nominating him to the combined school team in 2003 and for "wrecking his life".

In her decision yesterday, the judge found that the accused's act of hugging and kissing the boy on the cheek was not done with the intention or

knowledge that it was likely to outrage his modesty.

Even the boy himself had said he did not find the hug and kiss objectionable.

Ultimately, the judge said, there was no direct way of knowing for sure who was telling the truth. Neither was there any supporting evidence to confirm the boy's account.

During the trial, the boy had claimed that in 2004, there was an online MSN chat between himself and the teacher in which he told the teacher he was uncomfortable with the alleged acts. The teacher allegedly apologised and said he would not do it again.

But though the teacher disclosed his password for the chatline, the prosecution did not produce evidence of this online conversation.

The judge said she had given the prosecution every opportunity to prove that the conversation took place.

The teacher shed tears of relief after the verdict was announced and hugged two of his godsons, who were in court along with several of his friends and two of his sisters.

Suspended on half-pay since June last year, he said he just wanted to get on with his life.

"It has been a long road. I am happy that everything is over," he said.

The principal of the school said: "We respect the court's decision and are happy with the acquittal."

He said that the teacher, who teaches physical education (PE) and maths, had been with the school for 14 years.

As for whether the teacher will be able to resume his duties at the school, the principal said in a fax that the "Ministry of Education will be replying in due course".

**ADDITIONAL REPORTING  
BY HO AI LI**

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- Adopting 22 students as godsons
  - Buying expensive gifts for them
  - Hugs and kisses them in school
  - Shares bed with godsons

Madam Chong, who works in helpdesk support, said: "I want to remind them of the acceptable behaviour with their teachers."

Dr Clarice Hong, a child psychiatrist at Raffles Hospital Counselling Centre, said it is highly improper for teachers to share beds with their students.

She said: "If the child is very young, he may not be clear on what is acceptable physical intimacy and think that it is okay to sleep on the same bed with a stranger, or someone who is not his blood relative."

The onus, therefore, lies on the teacher to draw the line, said Dr Hong.

Dr Calvin Fones, consultant psychiatrist, said a teacher hugging and kissing young boys on the cheeks may make them feel uncomfortable and their personal space invaded.

That is especially if the boys have reached an age where they are aware of sexuality issues.

## Some parents find behaviour okay

Parents and former students who testified on behalf of the teacher said they found his behaviour acceptable.

One mother of a 11-year-old boy told the court she would let her son share a bed with the teacher, even with the door locked and curtains drawn in the teacher's bedroom.

The mother, a 42-year-old housewife, even described the teacher as a "perfect man", when the prosecution asked her to list his flaws, if any.

Her son, who is a godson of the teacher, has never stayed over at the teacher's place though.

She was one of several defence witnesses who painted a positive picture of the accused as an inspiring and caring teacher.

And they had no qualms with the teacher's practices of adopting godsons, sharing bed, hugging and kissing them and giving them expensive gifts.

This included another mother, who said she was grateful that the teacher had offered to be a godpa to her son, Paul (not his real name).

She said she agreed because she felt Paul would benefit from his guidance.

Paul, 21, who is now a customer service officer, also testified for the teacher.

Under the teacher's influence, the mother said, her son changed from an aimless, disobedient and mischievous boy into a young man with drive and consideration for others.

Her trust in the teacher meant that she had no objection to Paul staying overnight or sharing the bed with him.

The teacher's godsons also testified and elaborated on the godpa-godson relationship, the bed-sharing and the hug and kisses.

One of them was his godson Mark (not his real name), who said he recalled many fond memories with the teacher, including the sleepovers.

Said Mark, 20, who just completed his national service: "Our teacher would always offer to sleep on the mattress, but me and my good friend were never comfortable with the idea.

"So either of us would sleep on the floor instead."

Mark, who became a godson in 1997, said hugs and kisses on the cheeks were commonly used as forms of greetings between him and his godpa.

Another godson Luke (not his real name), 18, said he received many expensive gifts from the teacher.

Most were given on his birthday and some simply to motivate him to study hard, said Luke, who has just completed his A Levels.

But Luke said while he feels grateful for the gifts, they were not the reason why he agreed to be a witness for his teacher.

Matthew (not his real name) was another godson who testified in court.

The 18-year-old, who completed his A Levels recently too, said he agreed to be a godson in 1999 because he "felt very privileged to be loved by someone who really cared a lot for him and taught him lots of values".

## 'Prosecution failed to prove case'

AFTER an 11-day trial which began last November, the teacher was acquitted on Wednesday of molesting his former student twice and masturbating in front of the boy in 2003.

The alleged victim, who cannot be named because he is a minor, was a godson.

He was turning 12 in Primary 6 in 2003.

The allegations surfaced in August 2004 after the boy

confided in a former schoolmate, also a godson.

The schoolmate told his secondary school principal, who then lodged a police report in August 2004.

In court the teacher admitted that he had adopted 22 students as godsons since he became a teacher in 1993.

He would buy them expensive gifts, such as a \$100 sports bag or \$190 handphone to motivate them to study hard and be better behaved.

He also said he would frequently hug and kiss them in school as a form of greeting.

And lastly, that he would share his bed with his godsons when they stayed over at his place, sometimes alone or in groups, so that they could sleep more comfortably.

District Judge Jasvender Kaur said the prosecution has failed to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt and that there is not enough evidence to support the boy's testimony.