

NAVEL RING, LITTLE GIRL...?

Let's face it. Some arrests get gummed up by deputies who, like everyone else, are fallible and occasionally make mistakes in procedure, case law, or judgment. We all know that sometimes the stakes aren't that high. Thus you'll hear things like, "We'll just catch him dirty another day" or "Hey, with the hype/burglars, hookers and low-level narco dealers, they're always up to something –we'll get another chance."

On the other hand, there are times when the stakes are real high, and there are situations where any mistake in case law, procedure or judgment could allow a serious predator to walk. Santa Clarita Valley Station had such a case recently.

How do you feel about a registered sex offender who offers body piercing to minor females, performed while shooting the breeze with the girls about his previous sex exploits in prison?

Ok, but even when the case seems open and shut, are we absolutely sure we have not only everything necessary to convict, but also to get a decent amount of prison time? Let's not get ahead of ourselves, move too fast, or forget to dot an "i". In the worst case, we don't want our names memorialized in an adverse "... vs. Los Angeles County" decision eight years from now.

Santa Clarita Detective John Howard listened carefully at the station counter on the morning that Dolores Simms came to file the report. She told John about a guy who, a few weeks back, had performed a tongue piercing on her 16-year-old daughter Dinah.

John was filling in as a dispatch center deputy that day, due to personnel shortages. Although at first blush the reported incident may not seem high on the crime priority list, John recognized a case with potentially hidden importance when he saw one. He wrote a comprehensive first report, complete with additional lurid information about the suspect's having pierced a second girl's navel a few days after Dinah had gotten her tongue pierced. Dolores told John that her daughter Dinah was not likely to cooperate with any investigation.

"She won't even tell me where she got it done. However, my other daughter, Dinah's 14-year-old sister Kitty, is with me here today and will talk to you."

John interviewed Kitty in her mother's presence and learned that a few weeks after Dinah got the tongue stud, she had invited Kitty to go with her and their friend Iris, so that Iris could get a navel ring. Dinah told Kitty it was the same guy who had pierced her tongue a few weeks prior.

Kitty told John, “The guy was around 50 years old, and he had lots of tattoos. He said he does piercing as part of his regular job, and does it at his home as well, to make extra money. He seemed really scary to me.”

Dolores explained that Kitty knew the suspect’s name—Raleigh Wilson. With that and the address her daughter had gone to, they were able to check the Megan’s Law data base, confirming Dolores’ worst fears—he was a registered sex offender.

After finishing the first report and the interviews of the complainants, John immediately conferred with some of his partners in the detective bureau about what best to put on the title line of the report. He and Detective Eric Lasko settled on Penal Code 652(a)--body piercing a minor without parental consent--as describing the crime perfectly.

652(a) P.C. is an infraction, believe it or not. However, both detectives knew that if done by a 290 registrant, with his bedroom serving as his “piercing studio”, there *could* be some more serious crimes to be discovered in the follow-up investigation.

The case assignment was to Eric, whose problem was that the primary victim, Dinah, was “non-desirous” and uncooperative. Over the next few weeks, she seemed to be avoiding his overtures to be interviewed, by no acking door knocks and playing hooky from school.

Oh well, there is more than one way to skin a cat. Eric enlisted the assistance of Canyon High School Resource Deputy Derrick Alfred and furnished him with a photo line-up, including the suspect’s photo. Derrick found Dinah on one of her comparatively rare school attendance days, and managed to convince her to talk to him using a variation of the old “here or downtown” admonition—“Dinah, it’s here and now with me, or we’ll do it at your home with your parents.”

Dinah told him that she’d heard about “Raleigh the Piercer” from a friend, and that she went to Raleigh’s house, paid him twenty dollars and got her tongue pierced. She remembered signing some form (it was the rinky-dink “release of liability” form that Suspect Wilson had had her complete.) Dinah told Derrick that she didn’t want a “rat” jacket at school as the one who put all the kid’s favorite “parlor” out of business. Nevertheless, she picked the suspect out of the photo line-up without difficulty.

It was a great start for Eric. He promptly went to Canyon High, accompanied by his robbery team partner Detective Scott Gibson, to talk to the classmate whom Dinah had taken to Raleigh a few weeks later—16-year-old Iris.

Iris added some grisly details, such as... after she and the two sisters got there, Dinah’s younger sister Kitty abruptly left, apparently because of something that the suspect said to her which Iris didn’t overhear. Iris paid him \$20.00 to pierce her navel that day, and then went back to Raleigh’s house a couple weeks later to have her nipples pierced (\$40.00!). During this procedure, the suspect mentioned that he’d be willing to “do a

threesome” if Iris could find another girl willing. Then he photographed her breasts because “he likes to keep pictures of his work”.

Iris told the two detectives that Raleigh had offered to show her his pierced genitalia. She declined, but she explained to Eric and Scott that the suspect assured her the offer was not sexual, because “it is art”. (Note to reader: re-orient eyeballs after rolling them.)

Lastly, Iris said that Raleigh gave her some business cards to distribute among her friends at school! Eric asked Iris why she went to some guy’s house instead of a more legitimate “piercing parlor”, and she answered like the teenager she is—“because a legitimate business won’t pierce kids without parental permission!” (Reorient eyeballs again.)

Eric and Scott next interviewed 14-year-old Kitty at school. She described how her sister Dinah had invited her to come along to Raleigh’s house while their friend Iris got pierced. Kitty told the detectives that she had presumed that whoever they were going to was a high school student, and that when she saw the guy, she was really surprised at his age and appearance. Then, while Iris was reading and signing the release form, Raleigh directed his attention to Kitty and out of the blue started talking about sex, his preferences, whether he likes to give or receive, “threesomes”, and his sex activities while in prison.

Kitty explained that she became “creeped out”, especially after he offered to show her his private parts, complete with tattoo of a snake’s eyes. She therefore pretended that she had gotten a cell phone call and excused herself, leaving the house.

Eric now had what he needed for the next phase of the investigation—a chat with the suspect. He and Scott “strategized” that they would start out low-key but straightforward, and, depending on the suspect’s reaction, go from there. They drove to the suspect’s house, where he happened to contact them on the lawn.

“Good morning. We’re from the Sheriff’s Department. We’d like to talk to you about your body-piercing business.”

“Well, I don’t really run a business, and I haven’t pierced anyone in a long time. But my method of piercing, when I do it, is sanitary, and I rarely pierce minors.”

OK! Now, right there he has made admissions against interest and uttered provable deceptions. Those, plus the statements of the girls, might tempt the unschooled or inexperienced into thinking *heck, we’ve got plenty, let’s hook him up and sweat the rest out of him. Or even go with what we’ve got.*

Not sound!!!! In our system of justice, an unturned stone, especially one that an investigator easily *could have turned*, goes against the grain of the blindfolded lady with the scales. Eric and Scott knew that too well, and proceeded methodically and dispassionately, carefully preserving the non-custodial atmosphere.

“Say, when you *do* pierce a minor, do you get parental consent?”

“Sure. I also have the customers complete a release form.”

“Would it be ok if we take a look at the “release forms” you require?”

“Sure, come on inside.”

Eric and Scott followed the suspect into his house and on into the bedroom, where he did the piercings and kept the “records”. He showed the detectives a pile of release forms, which they paged through, only to see several minors’ names, and no indication of parental consent.

(Some readers might be wondering...*Nowww can we arrest him?!!??* Well, sure, we can always arrest lots of people who we know are “dirty”, but good investigators have a “*conviction* bias”, and really good ones shoot for the moon in terms of cumulative prison sentence.) Therefore....

Eric and Scott told him that they needed to ask him a few more questions, and the suspect brought them into his living room where they all sat on the couch. (Still no indication of custody, therefore no Miranda at this point! Smooth detectives!)

The detectives told Raleigh Wilson that there had been parental complaints about his activities, and that they knew he had, at least occasionally, pierced minors without the knowledge or consent of the parents.

“Yes, I’d heard that someone was having a problem with a job I did recently—something about someone’s younger sister upset with what she *thought* she heard me say.”

Eric refreshed the suspect’s memory by recounting his piercing of Dinah and Iris, as well as what Kitty had claimed that the suspect had said to her in describing his sexual preferences and conquests. He admitted piercing the girls absent parental consent, but he denied having said any such thing to the girl.

“Do you photograph the work you do for people?”

“No.”

“We have heard otherwise from some of your previous clients.”

“You’re really going to push this, huh? Ok, I’ll show you what I have.”

The suspect proceeded to open a dresser drawer and pull out several Polaroid photos of female body parts that he had pierced.

Eric asked, “Do you really think it is appropriate for a registered sex offender to be piercing private areas of under-aged girls and taking nude photos?”

The suspect’s answer encapsulated an explanation for much of the past millenium’s crime problems. “No, I guess *now that I think about it*, no, it’s not appropriate.” (Reorient eyes one more time.)

Eric knew that Raleigh’s previous offense had been forced oral copulation and vaginal penetration of his 14-year-old step-daughter. With what he’d collected in terms of evidence and statements, he had a fine case for proving that Raleigh had a sexual motivation for his sideline business and for his conversation with Kitty.

Therefore, Eric and Scott arrested Raleigh, grabbed his photos and his “sanitary” piercing kits, and took him to the station. Eric went on to get the suspect convicted of multiple counts of violating Penal Code section 647.6(a), a felony, “unlawfully annoying or molesting a child”, with a prior sex offense conviction.

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In one way of looking at it, Raleigh Wilson is doing 4.5 years in state prison for an “infraction”, thanks to Eric’s meticulous case preparation. That helps to offset the stomach-turning aspects of how this guy was operating. To say nothing of the danger he was creating. Eric recalls looking at the “sterile” piercing kit that the suspect showed him and asking the suspect, “Hey, have any of your customers ever gotten an infection after a job?”

The suspect had acknowledged that there had been some infections, but “...no problem! I offer free medical treatment at my house whenever that happens.”

It was Eric’s turn to roll his eyes.