Beat: Local

British teacher who ran away with student convicted of child abduction

-, 21.06.2013, 06:00 Time

USPA News - A 30-year-old British teacher, who was the subject of an international manhunt last year after running away to southwestern France with a 15-year-old schoolgirl who was in love with him, was convicted of child abduction on Thursday, prosecutors said. The court heard how the schoolgirl, who cannot be named in this report due to reporting restrictions, was reported missing on September 21, 2012, after she failed to turn up for class at the Bishop Bell C of E School in Eastbourne, a coastal town in East Sussex, about 83 kilometers (51 miles) southeast of central London.

Jeremy Forrest, her maths teacher, also failed to show up. The pair was found to have boarded a ferry from Dover, England, to Calais, France, at around 9:30 p.m. on September 20 after the girl had told her parents she was staying with friends. The schoolgirl had left with Forrest willingly, with surveillance photos showing the pair holding hands as they fled the country. The case received intense media coverage in Britain where the minimal age of consent is 16, but French authorities appeared to show little interest in the case as the age of consent in France is 15 and both had left willingly. Forrest and his student were eventually found in Bordeaux on September 27, a week after their disappearance, when the teacher was recognized while looking for a new job. Earlier this month, the schoolgirl told the court that she had considered suicide and planned to run away after police began investigating her relationship with Forrest, as well as problems at home. But the girl told the court the maths teacher had tried to stop her from running away, and eventually came with her to prevent her from getting into danger. After his arrest in France, Forrest was extradited back to England and charged with child abduction on October 10. He denied the charge but gave no evidence in court during the trial this month, and was convicted of child abduction on Thursday, with sentencing expected on Friday. The girl`s mother, who can also not be named as it would likely identify her daughter, thanked police for their work and support during the investigation. "As a family for the last nine months, it has been like living out your worse nightmare. Every aspect of our lives has been affected to some degree," she said. The mother added: "Finally I would like to mention my children and my fiance. I am so proud of you all. Your lives have been turned upside down yet you have been dignified when knowing the truth, supported each other and shown continuous strength not to allow this to affect the rest of our lives. I love you dearly." Detective Chief Inspector Mark Ling said Forrest had "grossly abused" the trust placed in him as a teacher. "His actions caused distress and anxiety among parents, family members and a school community," he said. "This case attracted significant national and international attention which put huge pressures on the girl`s family at what was already a distressing time." Ling added: "She and her family have continued to display great courage throughout the court case and we hope they can now start to put this behind them. This was a complex and fast moving investigation which needed the force to work closely with British and French law enforcement agencies, as well as the girl`s family and the school, to bring them home safely." Portia Ragnauth, Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor for Crown Prosecution Service South East, said Forrest had "brought disgrace" to his profession. "Forrest lied systematically about his relationship with the girl, repeatedly seeking to assure others, who were concerned about the welfare of his victim that nothing untoward was going on between them," she said. Ragnauth continued: "Nothing detracts from the fact that this was an abduction. The law clearly states that it is an offence to remove a child from the care of their parents or lawful guardian without the adult`s consent. Add to that the torment and anguish that the victim?s family went through while they were gone." "None of us can begin to imagine how worried they were about her safety and well-being while she was gone for over a week, not knowing where she was or whether she was safe. It`s a parent?s worst nightmare to have their child abducted and to not know whether they will ever see them again." Before the schoolgirl was found last year, her mother had described her daughter as being excited when she last saw her before she ran away with Forrest. And a blog posted on Forrest`s website on May 19 talked about trying to deal with a "moral dilemma," although he did not refer to his student or anyone else by name. "And the overiding (sic) question it left me with was this; How do we, and how should we, define what is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable???" he said. "I came to a few different conclusions, mainly that actually we get a lot of things wrong, but at the end of the day I was satisfied that if you can look yourself in the mirror and know that, under all the front, that you are a good person, that should have faith in your own judgement."

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1150/british-teacher-who-ran-away-with-student-convicted-of-child-abduction.html

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