

Signal Hill Settles with Woman who Claimed Rape

By: Tomio Geron, Staff writer
Long Beach Press Telegram

February 1, 2007

SIGNAL HILL - A woman who said she was raped and sexually abused as a teenager by two Signal Hill police officers in the early 1980s has reached a \$1 million settlement with the city of Signal Hill's Insurance company.

The settlement, which admits no wrongdoing on the part of Signal Hill, was reached on Jan. 19 by the California Joint Powers Insurance Authority, the city's insurance entity, and the woman, who did not wish to be identified.

The woman was between 15 and 16 years old and was participating in an Explorer Scout program sponsored by the signal Hill Police Department when the alleged assaults occurred between 1979 and 1981, according to David Ring, the woman's attorney.

The explorer Scout program was designed to allow high school students interested in law enforcement to get experience working with police officers.

Officers Gary D. Mortenson and Brian J. Campbell were accused of the assaults, Ring said.

Mortenson was in his late 30s and Campbell in his early 20s at the time of the alleged attacks.

Campbell was alleged to have committed three incidents of forced sexual assault and Mortenson was alleged to have committed "many instances," Ring said.

Both men were fired from the police department in July 1983 after the woman reported the alleged assaults and police investigated.

Neither was ever charged criminally in the alleged attacks, Ring said.

Ring said one of the officers had previously been fired in the late 1970s by the Fullerton Police Department for forced sexual activity with a teenage girl during a police ride-along.

"Signal Hill (police) knew and hired him anyway," Ring said. "They didn't put any restrictions on his being with female Explorer Scouts. That really was the crushing blow to the city in this case."

The case is rare, attorneys said, because it involved the use of a 2002 California law that allowed adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse to bring a lawsuit many years after the abuse occurred.

The law, which allowed these lawsuits to be filed until Dec. 31, 2003, despite the expiration of the statute of limitations, was enacted in response to widespread charges of sexual abuse by members of the Roman Catholic Church.

"It's a very unusual case," said Ed Richards, an attorney who represented the Joint Powers Authority in the case. "The observation I would make is, as a lawyer, it's very difficult to defend a case that occurred 20 years ago."

The woman decided after many years to file the case, Ring said.

"In 2003, she was the 40 years old," Ring said. "It caused her a lot of problems over 20 years. She read in the paper about a lot of the Catholic Church (abuse) cases and wondered how to do this now, and then she heard about the new law."

The woman said in her lawsuit that she suffered years of severe depression and emotional distress as a result of the abuse by the two officers.

The alleged assaults were part of a dark period in the Signal Hill Police Department's history, which included the 1981 death while in police custody of Ron Settles, 21, a well-known football player for Cal State Long Beach.

Two hours after being arrested for speeding, Settles was found dead, hanging in a jail cell by a mattress cover. No one was convicted in Settles' death, but the city did pay a large settlement to his family.

"The early '80s... was a really said period for the city," said Signal Hill City Manager Ken Farfsing. "Obviously we had police department issues that needed to be dealt with."

Two other Signal Hill police officers were fired in 1983 by the police department for earlier alleged sexual misconduct with the woman involved in the settlement, but one of them was reinstated, according to news reports at the time.

It was not immediately clear why the other two former officers were not accused in the woman's case.

Farfsing said that many of the officers from that time period no longer work for the police department.

"I'm very proud of our police department now," he said. "A lot has changed in 24 years. I think we're pleased with the police department as a city."