

Man guilty in human trafficking case

A Houston County jury found a Tennessee man guilty on Thursday afternoon of human trafficking and giving drugs to a 17-year-old girl.

Assistant Houston County District Attorney Banks Smith said the jury returned guilty verdicts against 28-year-old Santiago Alonso, convicting him of first-degree human trafficking and felony distribution of drugs to a minor.

"I believe, based on my discussion with the Attorney General's Office, this may be the first human trafficking case that's gone to trial in Alabama," Smith said.

Dothan police investigators arrested Alonso in August 2013, and charged him with human trafficking, distribution of drugs to a minor and felony first-degree possession of marijuana.

Houston County Sheriff's deputies took Alonso into custody after Circuit Court Judge Butch Binford revoked his bail upon hearing the jury's guilty verdicts.

Binford will sentence Alonso on June 18. Smith said Alonso faces 15 to 99 years or life in prison for the human trafficking and distribution of drugs to a minor charges, which are both class A felony crimes similar to murder.

Police were made aware of the case when the victim left the Quality Inn, where she said she was being held, and walked almost 8 miles to the Guest House Inn, where she was taken in by a patron there. The patron called police the following day and the victim said she had been held against her will, forced to take drugs and forced to prostitute herself while not being allowed to keep any of the money.

The victim testified earlier this week about how Alonso used a website to prostitute her against her will after picking her up in Mississippi and taking her to Memphis and then Dothan, where she escaped. The victim also testified she was threatened with bodily harm by Alonso and beaten on one occasion when she refused to have unprotected sex with him.

"I think the victim just had a lot of courage to walk away from it all because he forced her into prostitution," Smith said. "He kept a hammer in the front seat of the truck and she said he'd threaten them with a hammer."

Smith called the case one that involved a complicated human trafficking charge. According to Alabama law, a person commits the crime of human trafficking if he or she "knowingly recruits, entices, solicits, induces, harbors, transports, holds, restrains, provides, maintains, subjects, or obtains by any means another person for the purpose of labor servitude or sexual servitude."

But Smith also commended the investigators with the Dothan Police Department who worked the unusual case, which he said involved detectives who worked the sex abuse aspect from the juvenile division, narcotics, and an internet crimes investigator.

Smith argued during his closing that Alonso ran a prostitution business by selling young women on an online website called backpage.com.

"I think what we had were investigators working where their strengths were the best," Smith said.

Attorney Shaun McGhee, who represented Alonso at trial, said the jury deliberated nearly five hours before returning their verdicts around 2:30 p.m. Thursday.

“He’s maintained his innocence of these charges, and we’re disappointed in the verdicts,” McGhee said.

McGhee argued during his closing how the case was not about prostitution, but human trafficking.

While the jury deliberated Thursday, Alonso spoke to the Dothan Eagle. He said he’d previously turned down an offer by the prosecution of 25 years in prison in exchange for his guilty plea.

“They have a lot of other stuff, but I’m on trial for human trafficking,” Alonso said. “I’m not guilty of what I’m being accused of, that’s why I’m here trying to prove innocence.”

Alonso said he picked up the victim as she walked on the side of a busy highway in Mississippi because she appeared in need of help. Alonso said the girl was never harmed in any way.

Alonso also said when he thought the girl left the hotel in Dothan he believed she was just going to the store, not escaping.

“I’m just praying for the best outcome possible, and preparing for the worst,” Alonso said. “I am not guilty of the accusations against me.”

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