

'Going through hell': Man accused of crimes against kids details 3-year wait to be cleared

BY ALEX LANG

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An Horry County solicitor decided to drop charges against a man charged with sex crimes against children. The state announced its decision on Monday in the years-long case against Anthony Strickland. BY JOSH BELL

From the moment he was arrested on charges of sex crimes against children Anthony Strickland has professed his innocence. He told investigators they were wrong, he offered to answer questions and take a polygraph.

For three years he had to see his name linked to the charges and appear in court. That was until prosecutors announced this week they were dropping the charges.

"Pretty much going through hell," is how Strickland described the case.

His eyes turned red, water began to swell at his lower eyelids, and Strickland paced towards a window in a lawyer's conference room as he described the ordeal.

"One day at a time. One step, one day, one week, one month, trying to get to the end," he said.

Strickland and three other people — Panteleimon Spirakis, Lindsey Honeycutt, Ambrose Heavener — were charged with sex crimes against children in March 2016. Police say two children were forced to have sex with each other and adults.

Some of the alleged incidents occurred at a strip club, Chez Joey, where Honeycutt worked and Strickland was a manager, according to authorities. Others were alleged to have happened at Strickland's house.

Spirakis pleaded guilty as his trial was set to begin and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Heavener entered an Alford plea during a hearing last week and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. An Alford plea is when a defendant does not admit to the facts of the case, but says there is enough evidence to be found guilty during a trial.

Honeycutt was also sentenced to 15 years in prison after she pleaded guilty during a hearing last year.

On Monday, the 15th Judicial Circuit Solicitor's Office released a letter detailing why it was dropping charges against Strickland. The state didn't have enough evidence to move forward and none of the co-defendants would detail Strickland's involvement, the letter said.

If he knew what the victims were going through, Strickland said he would alerted others.

"It wasn't me," he said. "I had nothing to do with it."

Defense Attorney Jarret Bouchette said some of the evidence didn't match the case. For example, they described the club interior where the events happened. But, it didn't match the interior of Chez Joey.

Strickland said he had a month-long relationship with Honeycutt, but ended it when he saw her drug use.

There was also no video evidence in the case, despite arrest warrants claiming as much, Bouchette said.

"The reality is you have an innocent guy who had his world turned upside down," Bouchette said.

Strickland spent months in jail and then had to wear an ankle monitor for two years while on bond, he said. He was not allowed on school property while facing charges, meaning he missed events in his own high school-aged children's lives.

As the case sat in limbo, Strickland said he nearly lost custody of his kids, was dismissed from five jobs and faced death threats.

When he finally got word that charges were dismissed, Strickland said, "I went outside and screamed at the top of my lungs."

The lifelong Horry County resident is considering moving from the area for a fresh start. Though he knows there is no return to life like it was before the charges and his name will be synonymous with the case.

"It's not over," he said. "It still looks bad."