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A case with a magic touch

Man says budding witch stabbed him after dispute

BY ERIC HARTLEY

"The Craft," a 1996 thriller about four teen witches, drew mixed reviews and didn't break any box-office records.

But for a 17-year-old girl living in College park with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, the film became something of an inspiration, according to court records, trial transcripts and interviews.

The girls in "The Craft" are portrayed as social outcasts who use magic to get back at people they dislike – an abusive stepfather, a leering jock, a haughty prom-queen type.

According to the testimony of a friend, the 17-year-old repeatedly watched the film and talked of joining a "coven" with fellow teen-agers. She also downloaded spells from the Internet, according to records in Prince George's County Circuit Court.

According to her testimony and court records, her stepfather, Robert G. Kean, had told the teen and her mother they would have to move out of his house, where they lived for five years.

She was upset, she testified, because he had agreed to pay for her college education, then reneged on that promise when he broke off his relationship with her mother.

Though the circumstances are in dispute, no one doubts that on May 30, 1999, the 17-year-old took an orange-handled knife and repeatedly stabbed Kean in the chest and stomach, giving him severe injuries that required surgery.

The girl told police she stabbed Kean after he came into her bedroom and tried to rape her. Kean denied that and told a detective, "She tried to kill me."

The Journal does not identify juveniles who say they are the victims of a crime. The girl could not be reached for comment for this article. Kean, through his lawyer, declined to comment.

In April 2000, after a nine-day trial, a jury acquitted Kean of first-degree attempted rape and first-degree assault, but convicted him of second-degree assault, a misdemeanor. He was sentenced to six months in jail.

The Maryland Court of Special Appeals overturned that conviction, ruling that a judge improperly barred a detective from testifying that Kean denied the girl's account.

On Monday, a prosecutor dismissed the second-degree assault charge. Kean served about 40 days in jail in 2000 before he was freed on bail pending the appeal.

Kean's lawyer, Steven D. Kupferberg, said it was "one of the most bizarre cases I have ever tried."

Though Kupferberg argued that the girl's "obsession" with "The Craft" and witchcraft, along with her anger toward Kean, showed she had a motive to attack him, a judge did not allow jurors to hear testimony about witchcraft or the movie.

A person familiar with the investigation of Kean said the witchcraft was a "smokescreen" that Kupferberg used to try to deflect blame from his client.

"The man was in her bedroom in the middle of the night," said the person, who asked not to be identified.

Judge Sheila Tillerson Adams allowed Kupferberg to question one of the girl's friends with the jury out of the courtroom but stopped him in the middle of his questioning, saying the girl's interest in witchcraft was irrelevant to the case.

"I'm cut off?" Kupferberg asked.

“Absolutely,” the judge replied.

Tillerson Adams said in court that she had watched “The Craft” and did not think it was relevant to the charges against Kean. She rejected Kupferberg’s request to show the movie to the jurors.

In statements to police and in court, records show, the girl gave varying accounts of when she picked up a knife and why she stabbed Kean.

She first told police that “God Jehovah” told her to stab him, but maintained in court that her “conscience” told her to do it.

“I was thinking about the right time to stab him,” the girl testified.

Kean, who did not testify at his trial, told a detective he had asked the girl to get out of his house when she suddenly attacked him.

“She stabbed him right in the chest,” Kupferberg said. “He was just sitting there, and whammo!” ■

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