

## Academic receives suspended sentence for boy's abduction



Thomas Pfeiffer, who was convicted by a jury of abduction and false imprisonment of a German boy in 2009.

German academic Thomas Pfeiffer of Meadowview, Coolfin, Portlaoise received a three-year suspended prison sentence in Waterford Circuit Criminal Court last week for abducting and falsely imprisoning an 11-year-old German boy in his home over two nights in 2009.

Mr Pfeiffer (50, single), was convicted by a jury of abduction and false imprisonment of the boy who came to Ireland to improve his English and stay with a host family in Tramore.

Mr Pfeiffer, who worked at WIT, operated a one-man organisation that advertised host families on the internet for foreign students coming to Ireland to learn English, the court was told.

He pretended to the boy's mother to be both a 'Barbara O'Neill' and 'Tom Cahill', fictitious people who supposedly involved in his organisation.

Judge Pauline Codd said it was an "unusual and bizarre case" and the court was none the wiser as to the man's motives. The way the boy was treated by the man was "very frightening and upsetting", she said.

Garda Jennifer Ryan (Tramore), said the boy's mother discovered days before he was due to travel that he was not going directly to the host family but would stay the weekend in the man's home. This came as a surprise.

The mother rang Pfeiffer's number and he "deceitfully reassured her" that the boy would be staying with the 'Cahill family' at Portnaboe near Carrick-on-Suir. Yet no such family existed and the boy stayed in the professor's house for two nights.

He slept in a restricted sleeping bag with compartments for his arms and legs, which was described in court as “a straight jacket” - he was zipped in and was unable to get out of it until he was released in the morning.

Over the two-day stay the professor weighed and measured the boy and required him to do language tests and physical exercises that left him exhausted.

When he was handed over to the host family, the boy, who was uncomfortable and frightened by the experience, he was clearly upset; he contacted his mother who travelled to Ireland on hearing where her son stayed over the weekend.

In a victim impact report the boy’s mother said her son had been open and full of trust but the “imprisonment” in the professor’s house had a negative affect on him and changed him a lot and he would never forget what happened to him.

John O’Kelly SC, defending, said his client realised now that he was wrong in telling lies and giving the impression that he was part of an organisation when he was the only person involved.

He did that in order to convenience himself and to re-assure the boy’s family and there was no ulterior motive. He ‘puffed up’ his own organisation and nothing untoward was done to the boy. He was put in the sleeping bag and had to be let in and out and that was the extent of it.

For that he had paid a heavy penalty and found himself at the age of 50 convicted of serious offences and he had been in prison since December 6th last.

It was his first time in prison and at his age it was a thoroughly shocking experience.

On two occasions he was viciously assaulted, once after his arrival in Cork Prison and again when he went back there on the previous Monday night. He was beaten up and sustained an injury to his right jaw.

Such assaults were not uncommon in prison where certain people set themselves up as moral arbiters. Although it was made clear that nothing of a sexual nature happened certain prisoners immediately took it as an excuse to make his life hell.

Mr O’Kelly said his client had a very distinguished academic research career. He was a doctor of engineering and was currently working as a senior research fellow at the Technical University of Berlin. He was involved in research work and chaired a conference in Australia.

He was somebody that was too much involved in his vocation, he had a very logical approach to life and wasn’t concerned with ‘people skills’.

He was very sorry for the upset caused to the family, which he did not intend - he had paid a dreadful price and was now at the mercy of the court.

Judge Codd said the professor involved himself in quite a significant level of deceit and misrepresentation and created a false persona.

It was an unusual and quite bizarre case and the way the boy was treated was very frightening and upsetting.

The court fully accepted that he did not abuse the boy in any way but he had a lack of insight into his offending.

The offending was in the higher end of the lower scale of gravity. There was a certain amount of planning and deception in the commission of the offences and he abused the trust of the boy as well as his mother and aunt.

The deception in creating the 'Cahill family' and the false address was all part of a plan to keep the boy in his own house and it was an aggravating factor.

The Judge said the accused man wasn't co-operative with the Gardaí and had chosen to fight the case. The court was none the wiser regarding his motives. It was noted that he had a previous conviction for careless driving.

The three-year prison sentence for abduction was backdated to December 6th last and suspended for three years on the accused man entering a bond to keep the peace and have no further involvement in any organisation dealing with children in the context of education or sporting programmes.

Suspended sentences of one year each were imposed on the two counts of false imprisonment.