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Spiritual Healer Convicted In Child-sex Case

Defense Blames `Conservative Midwestern' Views

January 17, 1998 | By Carolyn Starks, Tribune Staff Writer.



JACKSON, Mich. — A convicted child molester who bounced through teaching jobs in northern Illinois before opening an alternative-healing center in Elgin was convicted Friday in the sexual abuse of a Michigan teen.

Jeffrey Knapp, 47, founder of the Inner Journey Institute for the Healing Arts in Elgin and a former schoolteacher in Woodstock and Ogle County, Ill., appeared stunned when the jury's verdict was read by Jackson County Judge Charles Nelson.

Knapp was convicted of second-degree criminal sexual conduct for making the 14-year-old Jackson boy touch him under the guise of spiritual healing.

"I don't think the jury could appreciate what this was about," said Knapp's lawyer, Darryl Mazur. "This is a conservative Midwestern community, and I knew we'd have some trouble explaining it."

Friends comforted Knapp's wife, Mary, and three of their children, who began to weep in the courtroom. Knapp was immediately taken to the Jackson County Jail. A sentencing hearing was set for March 4.

Knapp faces 5 to 22 1/2 years in prison, and his sentence will take into account his previous conviction in Illinois. In 1977, while Knapp was a 5th-grade teacher at Monroe Center School in Ogle County, near Rockford, he was convicted of molesting an 11-year-old male pupil and was sentenced to 5 years of probation.

In 1985, Knapp was hired as the principal of St. Mary School in Woodstock. But he resigned a year later

after parents complained that he was having sexually explicit conversations with pupils.

"My first thought was that there are no winners in this situation," the mother of the Michigan boy said outside the courtroom. "His family has been devastated, and mine has been devastated. I hope he can get the help he needs."

The emotionally charged trial mesmerized this working-class city about 30 miles west of Ann Arbor.

Courtroom debate between Mazur and Jackson County prosecutor Kathleen Rezmierski was turbulent at times, occasionally forcing Nelson to admonish them.

"This is only the second time in my career that I have had to use my gavel," Nelson said at one point.

The jury deliberated for three hours, and when the verdict was read, the Michigan state trooper who investigated the case put his head in his hands and wept. Rezmierski, fiery throughout the trial, rushed from the courtroom in tears.

"I felt it was very, very important to get that man off the streets and away from kids," said Rezmierski, a mother of two teenagers. "It was clear he would offend with other kids. I saw the pain he ravaged among other victims."

Knapp's Ogle County victim, now a 31-year-old man, gave detailed testimony about his former teacher. The man said Knapp gained his trust, then raped him during a period of more than a year.

But the most emotional testimony came from the Jackson boy, who sobbed during most of his time on the witness stand.

"I don't hate him," the boy said after the verdict was read. "I just think he is really sick."

On June 14, the boy attended an alternative-healing seminar held by Knapp at the home of a Jackson physician.

Knapp had built a reputation as a master healer with the ability to use the body's life force to heal the body and mind. A self-styled psychic, Knapp was considered a master teacher in reiki, an Asian alternative-healing technique. Those who practice it lay hands on the body to channel energy for healing the mind or body.

The boy had joined the seminar, searching for help in dealing with a friend's death in a car crash.

The boy cried as he told the jury that Knapp had twice taken him to an upstairs bedroom, closed the door and asked the boy to touch him.

During testimony, Knapp said he was trying to teach the boy a technique that would help the youth transfer sexual energy into spiritual energy. Knapp testified that he was unclothed and touched himself but never touched the boy.

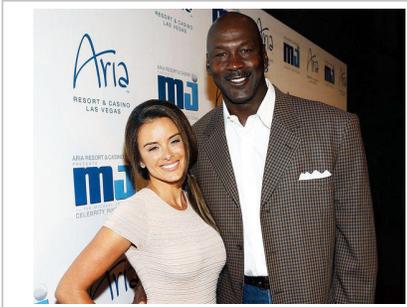
About a dozen witnesses, including those who have studied and written about reiki, tried to explain the metaphysical world, using terms such as chakra and "channeling energy."

Mazur said Knapp had innocent intentions in teaching the boy a spiritual technique.

In a courthouse hallway after the verdict, the boy said he had trusted Knapp mostly because he thought the self-proclaimed psychic had brought him a comforting message from his friend who had died in the car crash.

"He got me," the boy said, shaking his head. "I'm glad it won't happen to another kid for at least five years."

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