

Rape charges against teacher dropped

BY ANN GIVENS
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After he was charged with statutory rape two years ago, George Zanetis lost his job as a New York City school teacher, lost his wife and lost contact with his two children.

Today, the charges that caused his life to fall apart were dropped by the Nassau district attorney's office.

Zanetis, 44, of Roslyn, formerly a teacher at Aviation High School, a public school in Long Island City, was arrested in June 2004 and charged with having sex with a 16-year-old student. But after Zanetis' arrest the girl, whose name was not released, recanted her statement, and denied they had sex.

In recent months, prosecu-



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George Zanetis

tors preparing for Zanetis' trial could not reach the girl and ultimately could not make their case without her.

"She recanted on her testimony from day one," said Erib Phil-

lips, a spokesman for Nassau District Attorney Kathleen Rice. "Without her, we simply could not go forward."

Zanetis and his lawyer, William Petrillo of Rockville Centre, now say investigators may have intimidated the girl by keeping her in custody until she incriminated Zanetis.

"People who had always been on my side turned against me without evidence," Zanetis said. "My life has been wiped out and now I have to start over."

Richard Condon, special commissioner of investigation for the New York City School District, said his investigators did nothing wrong. He said the fact that the girl recanted does not change his mind about Zanetis' guilt.

"I feel they were engaged in

a sexual relationship," he said. "This outcome does not change my mind about that." He added that an investigation report shows that Zanetis had called the girl 30 times, and she had called him 134 times in a 10-month period.

Zanetis said he had an innocent relationship with the girl, and had agreed to drive her to the subway after school occasionally, with the consent of her legal guardian. He said he was shocked in June 2004 when investigators pulled them over and questioned them.

Initially, Zanetis said he agreed to plead guilty to the lesser crime of endangering the welfare of a child because he was misinformed by a previous lawyer about the law, and he was afraid of what would hap-

pen if he went to trial. But after hiring Petrillo, Zanetis was able to vacate his plea, an unusual step in a criminal case.

Zanetis is waiting now for a school district arbitrator to decide whether he can return to work. Condon said the dismissal of the charges will have no bearing on Zanetis' reinstatement, as he may have committed other offenses that could result in firing.

Zanetis said that after he was charged, he and his wife separated and he lost contact with his two children, ages 12 and 14, though he has begun visiting one recently. "I went from being with my kids every day, helping them with their homework, to not being with them at all," Zanetis said. "These are the pieces I'm going to have to put back together."