

JUSTICE SERVED

Local trial results in positive verdict for teacher's family

Madi McVan Copy Editor

On Oct. 8, 26-year-old Justin Johnson received a sentence of 20 years after a jury found him guilty of two counts of aggravated attempted kidnapping. The verdict followed a two-year process, from the day of the assault, through Johnson's arrest and subsequent release on bail, until the final criminal and sentencing trials.

Over two and a half years earlier, Johnson approached sisters 8-year-old Kaitlyn and 10-year-old Maddie Nash as they walked to Murchison Elementary School. He grabbed Maddie when the girls tried to walk away from him, but she dropped to the ground, escaped his grip, and together the sisters ran to Murchison, where they reported the incident to teachers.

After reuniting with her children, speech and debate director Kirsten Nash accompanied them to the Center for Child Protection, her former

place of employment, where professionals conducted forensic interviews with the sisters to gather information on the suspect.

"[The interview] was weird for me because that is where I worked before I started teaching," Nash said. "It was a really surreal moment when I was filling out forms that I had designed. But I felt like it was really comforting to know the procedure. Thankfully I had been on the other end of everything for a really long time."

Maddie's recollection of the man was so strong that a forensic artist was called in to create a sketch of the suspect. The sketch led to Justin Johnson being identified and arrested the next day, held at a \$300,000 bail at the Travis County jail.

However, Johnson quickly hired an attorney, and within the week managed to lower his bail enough that he could pay to be released.

"The entire time we were waiting for trial, he was out," Nash said. "He was on house arrest, but trying to explain that to children is really hard. Because right away we were like 'yes, he's in jail, it's awesome.' But I don't keep a lot of things from my kids, so when we found out that he had been released, we were devastated, but of course I wanted the girls to know."

Because Johnson wasn't taking up any space in the jail, his trial kept getting pushed back and postponed for two years and seven months, a common occurrence that Nash calls "a flaw in the system."

The innocent/guilty phase of the trial finally began in September this year, in which both Maddie and Kaitlyn testified against Johnson, who

was present in the courtroom.

"Having worked in the center, I knew the kids would have to testify," Nash said. "Which is a big surprise for a lot of parents. I know from being there that most people in Texas think that children should not have to sit in the courtroom, directly across from the person who did those horrible things to them, and testify."

Though Johnson was found guilty in the first phase of the trial, due to formalities, the sentencing phase of the trial did not occur until two weeks later. During that time, Johnson was once again released on house arrest.

"So we had found out that he was guilty, but we still had to wait for two

weeks to see what the punishment would be," Nash said. "It was a stressful two weeks. Because kids know that when you are guilty, you are punished for it. And they expect that if you are trying to steal children, you should be put away for a long time."

"For our little family, it's made us just appreciate each other more, and I have so much respect for the girls and so much admiration for how strong they've had to be."

- Kirsten Nash



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