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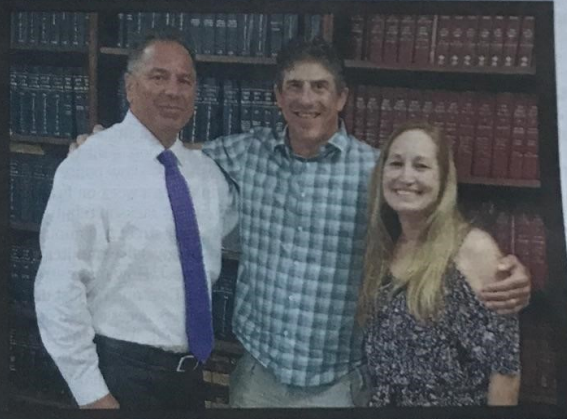


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Trenton Public Schools teacher 'relieved' as prosecutors drop sex assault charges » PAGE 3



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EXONERATED

Charges dropped against teacher accused of sex assault

By Sulaiman Abdur-Rahman

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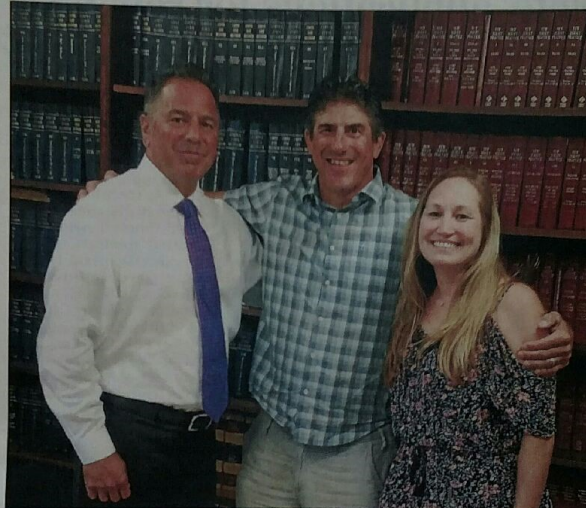
TRENTON » After being arrested, jailed and prosecuted on a child's sexual assault allegations, city schoolteacher Robert "Mr. C" Ciaccia on Monday had his prayers answered when the state dismissed all charges against him.

"I'm just excited to get back to teaching," Ciaccia said in an exclusive interview with *The Trentonian* hours after being exonerated. "I'm hoping to be put back in my classroom with my family. That's my family at Franklin Elementary. I wouldn't want to be moved to another school."

Trenton Police on June 23 arrested Ciaccia at the public school on William Street and charged him with two counts of sexual assault and one count of endangering the welfare of a child after one of his fourth-grade students accused him of criminal sexual contact.

The victim, a 9-year-old girl, said Ciaccia touched her buttocks over her clothing on two different occasions at the school, once last year before Christmas and another time on May 25. She also said she had witnessed Ciaccia molest two other students, but Ciaccia's legal defense team was able to disprove those allegations and discredit the victim's credibility.

Private investigator Cindy Liccardo, a former Mer-



SULAIMAN ABDUR-RAHMAN — THE TRENTONIAN

Trenton Public Schools elementary teacher Robert "Mr. C" Ciaccia (center) displays a huge smile of relief on Monday, Aug. 28, 2017, after learning that the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office dropped all charges against him two months after a 9-year-old student accused him of sexual assault. Ciaccia is joined by his private defense attorney Nick Travisano (left) and his wife Autumn Ciaccia at the attorney's law offices in Hamilton.

cer County assistant prosecutor, said she had talked with teachers, parents and students and learned that "some of the victim's allegations were not credible."

The victim said Ciaccia had molested her and that she saw him molest two other students, but those two other students in question said it "never happened," Liccardo said.

After his June 23 arrest, Ciaccia was jailed at the Mercer County Correction Center in Hopewell Township pending a detention hearing. Prosecutors wanted to keep Ciaccia locked up without bail on pretrial detention, but Ciaccia's legal defense team at the June 28 court proceeding exposed weaknesses in the case and a judge ordered Mr. C to be released upon determin-

ing that the beloved schoolteacher posed no threat to public safety.

On Monday, Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri filed a motion to dismiss all charges against Ciaccia on the following grounds: "There is insufficient evidence upon which to predicate successful prosecution for these charges."

Mercer County Superior Court Judge Thomas Brown signed the motion on Monday, and with that stroke of a pen, Ciaccia was fully cleared and exonerated of all charges.

Nick C. Travisano, Ciaccia's private attorney, on Monday said he believes the prosecutor's office "did the right thing" in June when it filed charges against his client based upon the victim's allegations, and that the office again "did the right thing" on Monday when it dismissed the charges.

"What do you do when a little girl comes in and says that 'a guy touched me?'" Travisano said. "The fact that they dismissed the charges as expeditiously as possible is a credit to that office. I don't have anything bad to say about any one of them from Angelo on down."

Ciaccia "is a good guy, and he's wonderfully suited for the classroom," Travisano said. "It is thrilling for me to be able to make a meaningful difference in his life."

The defense attorney said he does not know why a student would falsely accuse his client of criminal conduct.

"I don't take sex assault cases as a rule," said Travisano, a high-profile lawyer based in Hamilton, "but I took Mr. C's case because I believed in his innocence from the beginning."

Indeed, numerous people from Ciaccia's co-workers and students to his former colleagues and associates provided Ciaccia with an overwhelming amount of

support throughout his ordeal.

"I am relieved," Ciaccia said Monday at Travisano's law offices, his face radiating with exuberance alongside his wife Autumn Ciaccia. "I prayed; a lot of praying. I knew I had people looking after me."

Ciaccia, 45, of Falls Township, Pennsylvania, has two decades of teaching experience, mostly from educating Trenton Public Schools students at Franklin Elementary. He said he "cried a lot" during this ordeal but that he had "a lot of support" from people who knew the charges against him were "just false."

"It changes you," Ciaccia said of being arrested, charged and jailed for several days for a crime he did not do. "I'm a really positive person, but when something like this happens, you are tested. You are carrying a heavy weight with you every day and you have to have faith."

A married father of three children, Ciaccia said he hopes to return to teaching at Franklin Elementary when summer recess ends and students return to school Sept. 6. The Trenton Board of Education suspended him with pay. The Pennsbury School District in Pennsylvania stripped Ciaccia of his other job as the William Penn Middle School wrestling coach.

"I'm just excited to get back to teaching and try to be positive," Ciaccia said, "because being positive got me this far."

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