

Man, 21, cleared by jury of child-sex offenses

Courts • A public defender says his client didn't match descriptions of the perpetrator.

BY LOIS EVEZICH
The Orange County Register

Anthony Michael Palmieri was acquitted Thursday of five counts of child molestation and one count of indecent exposure by a jury after 20 minutes of deliberation. Palmieri, 21, was arrested May 29 in Arcadia, ending a three-month search by Orange County sheriff's deputies for the man who witnesses said was exposing him-

self and chasing children near Aliso Viejo Middle School and on trails along Aliso Creek in Mission Viejo and Aliso Viejo.

Palmieri's attorney, public defender Thomas Lo, said his client was acquitted because witness descriptions didn't match Palmieri's age, size or looks.

"The consensus was that witnesses described a 40-year-old man, dark-complected, maybe Hispanic or

Persian, and that's what the jurors had trouble with," said Lo.

Palmieri is 5-foot-6, 120 pounds and white, said Lo.

Deputy District Attorney Thomas E. Welbourn, who tried the case, could not be reached for comment.

Teachers and parents at the middle school were surprised by the verdict.

"I was appalled when the incidences were told to me," said Clare Ligh, president of the Parent-Teacher-Student Association at Aliso Viejo Middle School.

"I'm more appalled that he's

released."

Lisa Millerd is a past-president of the Parent Teacher Association at Don Juan Avila School and teaches at Aliso Niguel High School.

"I don't have all the facts," said Millerd. "I'm sure there were reasons why they let him go."

Palmieri was brought to trial after a deputy thought he recognized Palmieri from an artist's drawing based on a witness's description of the flasher.

The Sheriff's Department issued a press release March 24 naming Palmieri as a tran-



Palmieri

sient and a sex-crimes suspect. It included his photo, but not the artist's drawing.

But during the three-day trial at Harbor Court, a 15-year-old witness couldn't identify Palmieri.

Lo said the girl stood up, looked around the courtroom, paused and said she didn't see the perpetrator.

"When the prosecutor showed her a big blowup of the booking photo and asked

if that was the man, she paused and said 'No,'" said Lo.

"Their case went downhill from there."

Palmieri, who has been in custody for two months, was scheduled to be released before midnight Thursday.

His mother, two sisters and a brother-in-law were in court.

According to Lo, Palmieri was staying with his sister in Arcadia when he was arrested.

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