

Charges dropped against Rocklin (CA) teens accused of threats on social media

By: Scott Thomas Anderson, Editor
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A series of teen arrests which sparked fear during Rocklin's 2014 graduation season have now been deemed an instance of reckless behavior rather than criminal intent. Prosecutors officially announced July 1 they will not pursue charges against any of youths whose social media comments triggered worry and apprehension for local classmates in May.

The news from the Placer County District Attorney's Office that the case was being dismissed was especially important for 18-year-old Justin Herrmann, the only defendant who was old enough to have his name circulated through regional television and newspapers. While Herrmann's family and law enforcement disagree on aspects of how the investigation was handled, one thing they appear to agree on is that teenagers are living in a new era of having their lives effected by social media.

The incident was triggered May 29, on the eve of graduation at Whitney High School. What should have been a moment of unfettered excitement for students was dampened by worries after a parent contacted Whitney's principal with fears about rumors swirling. The Rocklin Police Department was called in to investigate. Officers soon discovered a social media feed that made reference to possible shootings at both of the city's high schools. Herrmann and two 17-year-old suspects were arrested as police increased security at Whitney's graduation. Herrmann had reportedly posted a message saying that a friend of his was going to "shoot up the school."

However, according to Placer County Assistant District Attorney Jeff Wilson, no such friend of Herrmann's ever existed. A series of inflammatory messages that followed from random students — including "I am the real shooter," "wear neon and Kevlar today" and "it's shoot up the school day" — were not connected to Herrmann and evidently meant to be humorous or sarcastic, according to prosecutors.

The District Attorney's Office stressed that in order for them to have a viable case against Herrmann and the 17-year-olds there had to be proof the threats were meant to be taken seriously and intended to terrorize others.

"While Mr. Herrmann may not have committed a crime or posed a threat to the school, it is clear that his delay in cooperating with (Rocklin police) officers directly related to the escalation of a volatile situation," Wilson said in a statement on July 2. "It is clear that if he admitted what he had done when first confronted by law enforcement rather waiting until the situation had escalated, the response of the police and school administrators to protect the students may have been unnecessary."

Wilson's statement added in the wake of mass school and public shootings the actions of Herrmann and a number of other students marked the height of irresponsibility.

"It should be clear to everyone by now, including high school students, that after the tragedies we have watched unfurl on campuses around our nation, the smallest of comments suggesting impending campus danger will not be dismissed but met with a prompt response to keep our schools safe," he noted.

While Herrmann's father, Scott Herrmann, has characterized the Rocklin Police Department's response as overzealous, he did acknowledge that the media flurry around his son's arrest points to the changing nature of how teens interact with the digital landscape.

"(Justin) learned a very hard lesson about the power of words, and he suffered very real consequences," Scott Herrmann said in a statement to reporters. "He lost a college scholarship, the right to participate in high school graduation ceremonies and activities, and was put on trial in the media and on social media. We paid thousands of dollars to defend him. We hope that this situation can be a teachable moment for others. In today's world, every move kids make is chronicled by social media. There is no room for mistakes."

Rocklin Police Chief Ron Lawrence defended the actions his officers took in the middle of a murky, rapidly evolving and potentially threatening situation on the eve of graduation.

"In cases like these we don't know the people who may think they're engaged in a hoax or a prank — we have to act on any possible threat with the facts we have in front of us," Lawrence told the Placer Herald. "And in this particular case we only had a matter of hours to respond."

Lawrence agreed with Wilson that claims of impending death at schools can't be seen by police officers or anyone else in a vacuum.

"Given the same set of facts tomorrow we would respond in the same way," Lawrence said. "One only has to think of Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech or Columbine to know that this isn't funny."