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A Section Page 1A

Ordeal ends for coach

Now that he's been cleared of plotting to kill a judge, Parker wants to return to teaching.

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For the first couple of months after his arrest, Carroll Graham Parker Jr. spent long hours at home working jigsaw puzzles to fill the time he'd normally spend coaching soccer and teaching history.

Ten months and 26 puzzles later, the McCollum High School coach hopes to return to the classroom an exonerated man.

Thursday, a Bee County judge dismissed charges against Parker that linked him to a plot to kill 144th District Judge Mark Luitjen.

Parker, 38, was arrested last summer and accused of conspiring to murder the judge by acting as a middleman for his childhood friend, prison inmate Robert E. Lee. Investigators alleged Lee was upset over a recommendation Luitjen had made on one of his appeals and enlisted Parker to collect money to have the judge killed.

Lee is serving two 25-year prison terms for a failed 1997 murder-for-hire plot against his estranged wife. Lee had been incarcerated at the Beeville Unit, but was transferred more than a year ago to a unit in Abilene.

Parker, who used to visit Lee monthly, said he hasn't seen his friend in the past year.

"I've never discussed any plot to hurt anybody, kill anybody at any time," Parker said Friday at his lawyer's office.

At a pre-trial hearing Thursday, Herb Hancock, a special prosecutor for Bee County, filed motions to dismiss both cases pending against Parker: conspiracy to commit capital murder and conspiracy to tamper with physical evidence. The first charge, a first-degree felony, carried up to life in prison upon conviction. The second is a state-jail felony, punishable by up to two years behind bars, Hancock said.

In exchange for the lesser charge being dropped, Parker will testify for the state in its case against Lee, who is indicted for solicitation to commit capital murder.

"I'm going to answer a subpoena just like anybody else in the state of Texas is going to do," Parker said. "I'm going to tell the truth of the facts as I know them, like everybody else should do, and that's what I agreed to."

Lee's case could go to trial as soon as August, Hancock said.

He declined to discuss specifically the weaknesses in the case against Parker. Hancock said in an earlier interview that part of the case included secret recordings investigators taped with Parker and letters between Parker and Lee.

"We appreciate him taking a fair look at the evidence and making the right decision," defense lawyer Pat Hancock said of the prosecutor who shares his last name but is not related.

The Bexar County District Attorney's office reviewed the case in December but declined to take it to a grand jury.

"We did not believe the evidence was sufficient for prosecution in Bexar County," said First Assistant to the District Attorney Michael Bernard, regarding the case against Parker.

Luitjen declined comment on the dismissals, citing the impropriety of commenting on an open case as a sitting judge.

Parker is hopeful he can get back to his life.

He briefly met with Harlandale School District Superintendent Jack Jordan on Friday and gave him copies of the dismissals. Parker said he'll meet again Monday with district officials to discuss his future.

The district has kept him on the payroll since his arrest, and he said he's anxious to return to the job he loves. He thanked family, friends and the school district for their support.

"I'm looking forward to having my real life back," he said.

Other coaches pulled double-duty to cover for Parker this year, said Delilah Rodriguez, assistant superintendent of personnel. She said that if the case against the 13-year veteran teacher is gone, he'll be welcomed back.

Parker's mother said the case has robbed the entire family of almost a year of their lives.

"It was the centerpiece of our lives for nine months," she said. "We didn't talk about anything else."

She said she believes authorities pursued a case against her son because he backed out of a deal with investigators to try to get Lee to admit the murder plot on tape. Her son's experience has her questioning her formerly solid trust in law enforcement.

Still, she said: "I can't go stand up on top of a mountain and say, 'Don't trust the law,' because when someone's prowling around my window at night, that's who I want to call."

Asked why the case against Parker made it as far as indictment and mere months from trial, Parker's lawyers pointed to the gravity of the accusation.

"I think the initial allegation was one of a very serious nature," Pat Hancock said. "We're talking about conspiring to take the life of a district court judge. I think that got the attention of law enforcement."

Pat Hancock said the initial allegation - a letter from another inmate to the San Antonio Express-News outlining a plot - was unfounded.

"I wish that would have been looked at a little more seriously in the beginning," he said. "But we're in the business of looking at the end result, and the end result is great: Carroll Parker gets his life back."

Parker said life, complete with stacks of solved 1,000-piece puzzles and episodes of "Survivor," has

gotten better over the months.

"When it first happened ... I just sat around the house wondering how a person's world could be turned upside down so fast," Parker said. "Then you get angry, not at anybody or anything - at yourself for sitting around not doing anything."

He started working out and helped his mother and her boyfriend with their new vending business.

"As time went on, actually it does soften and you start living a regular life," he said. "You're not afraid to go outside, you're not afraid to go to the movies. Your friends are always going to be your friends. There's going to be skeptics no matter what I say."

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