

Cabbie: Cops find rape claim was fabricated

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Cabbie cleared in 'rape' that never was

By Phil Helsel
Register Staff

WEST HAVEN — When a 15-year-old girl ran up to a cop May 8, screaming and claiming that a taxi driver had tried to rape her, the officer assumed the worst and police arrested the cabbie later that day.

But it turns out the girl made up the story to get out of paying the cab fare, police said, and all charges were dropped Tuesday against driver Oluyemi Otunba-Payne, a Nigerian immigrant and father of two who lives in Hamden.

"I was crying in the courthouse," said Otunba-Payne, 48, who has lived in the United States for 25 years. "I'm just happy this is all over."

Otunba-Payne was arrested after the girl, who was not identified by police, tried to run out of his cab at West Spring Street May 8. He caught her and held her jacket and a curling iron to make sure she would return with the money, his attorney said, but the girl instead approached a police officer claiming that Otunba-Payne tried to rape her.

He was charged with one count each of attempted first-degree sexual assault, third-degree robbery, third-degree sexual assault, second-degree unlawful restraint and risk of injury to a minor.

But detectives uncovered the truth after finding inconsistencies in the girl's story, police spokesman Officer Angelo Moscato said, and they recommended in Superior Court in Milford that the charges be dropped.

None of the girl's allegations — that Otunba-Payne offered to waive the fare in exchange for a sex act and then tried to rape her in the back seat of his Metro Taxi cab before she managed to escape — turned out to be true, police said. The case is still under investigation, Moscato said, and the girl could be arrested herself for making a false report.

"The reason she ran off was she didn't want to pay the cab fare," Moscato said. "But on the other side, here's an officer and you see someone running, screaming. ... We have to act quickly, because (what if) we have someone who is a predator out there?"

Otunba-Payne said that while he knew the allegations were false and that he would eventually be vindicated, news of the arrest has been hard on his two teenage children and his family. He said most of his friends and acquaintances kept an open mind, but not all.

"I told a couple of people (of his innocence) and they just ignore you because they assume you're guilty," Otunba-Payne said. "These were people I go to church with every Sunday."

Otunba-Payne's attorney, Tara Knight of New Haven, called the phony report "a real horror story" and said Otunba-Payne faced up to 20 years in prison on the attempted first-degree sexual assault charge alone. She said the girl's fare that day was about \$20.

While many reported rapes are legitimate, this is not the first time an alleged victim has been caught fabricating a sexual assault in Connecticut.

In 2002, a woman whom police did not identify made up a story about being attacked by two men at the University of Connecticut, and police said at the time that she made the details similar to a legitimate assault that had happened a month earlier.

Last year, a city woman admitted to concocting a story about being raped, in a convoluted plan to repair her marriage, police said.

The woman was arrested for filing a false report in July after she admitted that the brazen home invasion and rape was made up in a desperate bid to get her husband to come to her aid.

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Assistant State's Attorney Kevin Lawlor said he agreed that Otunba-Payne's case should be thrown out.

"It's as much a part of our job to clear people who have been wrongly accused as it is to aggressively prosecute people," he said.

Otunba-Payne said that the experience of being accused of an attempted rape he didn't commit will not keep him off the road. He's driven a cab for 10 years, he said, and one bad fare isn't going to change that.

"That is not going to stop me from doing what I love," he said. "I love driving a cab."