

Courage and justice; Victims' willingness to come forward led to sex-abuse conviction.(A SECTION)(Editorial)

Source:  Sarasota Herald Tribune

Publication Date: 13-APR-06

Because three men courageously stepped forward, James LaMorte Sr. won't escape punishment for his decades-old sexual abuse of young people.

LaMorte, who coached and taught at Venice High School for 30 years, pleaded guilty Monday to the sexual battery of a former student. He also pleaded no contest to two other sexual-abuse charges.

The charges were brought by two former students and another man, all of whom said LaMorte, now 63, committed the acts more than 15 years ago. The battery to which he pleaded guilty occurred more than 25 years ago. Prosecutors say they'll seek a prison term of more than seven years for LaMorte.

We commend the men who brought the charges. It's extremely difficult for victims of sex crimes to divulge what occurred. Their willingness to testify in court may have led to LaMorte's unexpected plea.

LaMorte, who retired when the charges were lodged against him, had tried four times to have the charges dismissed. He argued that the alleged crimes happened so long ago -- from 1980 to 1984 and in 1991 -- that they couldn't be prosecuted.

His strategy almost worked. The Venice Police Department and state attorney's office said last year that the statute of limitations prevented LaMorte's prosecution.

Justice prevailed only after Venice lawyer Robert Harrison, who represents one of the victims, discovered a 30-year-old statute that removes the prosecution time limit for the acts of public officials and employees if charges are brought within two years after they leave the public sector.

We commend Harrison for his refusal to unquestioningly accept a legal opinion.